THE ROMANCE OF THE SILVER SHOON

REV. DAVID BEARNE S. J.

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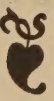
THE ROMANCE OF THE SILVER SHOON

A Story of the Sixteenth Century

BY

REV. DAVID BEARNE, S.J.



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THE ROMANCE OF THE SILVER SHOON

CHAPTER I

OLAF'S CHRISTMAS GIFT

"IT IS impossible!" exclaimed the King of Bonhomy.

"It is preposterous," said his Queen.

"Sire," said Prince Olaf to his father, "your Majesty's word can never be impossible or preposterous. Moreover, it cannot be broken."

The King laughed, though he had been entrapped and he did not like it. It was an old promise that he had made to his son. When Olaf was twelve years old he was to choose his own Christmas gift, for Christmas Day was his birthday.

For something expensive the King had been prepared. It was not the costliness of what Olaf had asked for that disturbed his Majesty, but the extraordinary nature of the thing itself. Indeed the King had been ready to spend much more money than would be required for what Olaf wanted. The boy inherited a taste for beautiful things, and within certain limits both the King and Queen were willing to gratify that taste. For if he was not faultless he was a loving and an obedient son; and though his father and mother

felt sure he would never be a Cardinal-Archbishop, as they had hoped, they were equally sure he would always be a pious Catholic. He was their youngest child, the youngest of seven sons. He had five sisters and four of them were married. A pair of solid silver shoes! This was the unheard of gift that Olaf desired. Always he had had a notable taste for the white metal. And now the King and Queen came to think of it, every birthday present they had ever given him had been made of silver. It is true that the cups sent to him for his christening were of gold; but from his earliest years he had preferred silver to the more precious metal.

"But, my child," remonstrated the Queen, "even if the silversmith can make them to fit you nicely they are sure to hurt your feet."

"Not if he lines them with silk or velvet, and I wear my winter hose," said the Prince.

"Certainly they will be very uncomfortable," laughed the King, "and serve you right. Why you might just as well wear the iron shoes that belong to your suit of armour."

"May I send for the court silversmith, sire?" asked the boy, as he kissed his father's cheek.

"Yes, but you'd better send for the shoemaker as well," put in the Queen. "Silversmiths are not cobblers, you know."

"To be sure," said Olaf as he put his arms round his mother's neck. "I never thought of that."

"Fortunately, my darling," said the Queen as she kissed his lips, "you have the small pretty feet that belong to my side of the family."

It wanted just three weeks to Christmas Day, and Olaf's one anxiety was lest the silversmith should fail to have the gift finished in time. But long before the Angelus bell rang on Christmas Eve the silver shoes were on the Prince's feet. He was so delighted with them that he wanted to make the silversmith a knight, but this, said the King, was not in the bargain. Certainly the man had followed the Prince's instructions to the letter. So little surprise had he shown at the command, Olaf was half inclined to think that, after all, silver shoes were not a novelty. They were made, said the smith, of solid silver of the purest quality, quite without ornament of any kind, saving that the Prince's device was engraved upon the instep, just where the latchet opened on the hinge in order to admit the foot. They were lined with wadded silk.

Olaf declared that they were not only a perfect fit but the most comfortable pair of shoes he had ever worn. He admitted that they were heavier than he had expected them to be, and he had not thought they would make quite so much noise when he walked in them. His

pages were full of admiration of such a novelty; though one boy who had once worn wooden shoes for a month as a punishment told the Prince that his new foot-gear was many times heavier than sabots.

No need now to ask where the Prince was: the noise of his metal shoes falling on stone and marble and wood could everywhere be heard, unless the floor rushes chanced to be very thickly strewn. When his Highness walked into the castle-chapel for Midnight Mass his footfall was like that of a man-at-arms.

It had been the custom that on Christmas Day some member of the royal family should visit the big Carmelite priory that stood at the foot of the hill. This year Prince Olaf was to be permitted to represent the King, his father. Olaf was delighted. Here was a splendid chance of showing off his Christmas gift. After the last Mass he mounted his horse and attended by a retinue of pages and guards rode down the snow-covered hill to the priory gates, where he was received by the Prior and community. Boy-like, he had anticipated the hour at which royal visitors were expected, and though a special messenger had been sent to tell the friars of his Highness's approach, it was impossible for them to dismiss the great crowd of poor people who waited at their gates for the Christmas dole.

Now up to this time the Prince's life had been a very sheltered one, and though he rode out hunting quite regularly, and sometimes passed through the principal streets of the city, he had never before seen such a crowd of hungry-looking men and women and children.

As he reached the priory and reined in his horse to look round upon the multitude, he was astounded to see so many blind and crippled folk, so many ragged and barefooted boys and girls, so many evidences of poverty, disease, and suffering. It seemed to him that the misery of the whole world had been collected and brought to the gates of this religious house.

Too feeble to burst into lively cheering, the crowd began to make some demonstrations of loyalty and respect. The guards had already cleared a way to the priory gates, and as his Highness advanced the people went down on their knees in the snow. To the astonishment of the Prior, as the Prince stepped forward there were tears in his eyes.

"Father Prior," began Olaf as soon as he had dismounted, "why do all the poor people in the world come to you?"

"Alas! your Highness," said the Prior with a sad smile, "these are only a very few of the poor of the city. Crowds like this are waiting at the gates of

every religious house in the world; yea, and bigger crowds than this."

"Is it possible!" exclaimed the Prince. "But do they always come to beg on Christmas Day?"

"Always, your Highness," smiled the Prior, "and every day in the year. At times we try to give them bread, but on great festivals we contrive to have something extra for them."

The Prince looked down at his silver shoes and was silent for a moment. Suddenly he asked: "Will they have to wait longer now that I have come? Please do not let them: they look so very cold and hungry."

"That is a most kind thought on the part of your Highness, but——" the Prior hesitated.

"Father Prior," exclaimed the boy with decision, "I will come again. I will come to-morrow. But first I must see my father and mother."

Hastily kissing the Prior's beads the Prince hurried back to his horse as fast as his silver shoes would permit him. In another moment he was riding away at a gallop.

On St. Stephen's Day Prince Olaf was present at High Mass in the priory church. When he had communicated, instead of returning to his seat in the choir,

he went to the crib and knelt there long after the Mass was finished.

When his Highness had left the church, the sacristan found standing just within the crib a pair of silver shoes. Within one of them lay a scrap of parchment, and this is what was written upon it.

"Olaf, a sinful boy, begs King Jesus to accept these shoes. Father Prior, who is the almoner of King Jesus, will please turn this silver into many pairs of wooden shoon for the poor boys and girls of the city. May the King of Heaven always have pity on the soul of Olaf, a sinner."

Two years later among the young Carmelite novices who helped to serve the Christmas dole to the poor was a boy who had that very morning received the holy habit. As he moved about with smiling face and loving eyes the people were heard whispering to one another: "If that is not our good Prince Olaf, it is his angel!"

"Two years ago," said one friar to another, "he gave his silver shoes to the Infant Jesus; to-day he has given himself to the Divine Babe for ever."

CHAPTER II

A CHRISTMAS BALL-DRESS

TO TELL you that the young Queen Marabout once ruled over the kingdom of Lesser Potamia, is merely reminding you of what you know; while to insist overmuch on the fact that Lesser Potamia is bounded on the north and east by Great Potamia, on the west by Bonhomy, and on the south by the Milky Sea, would be an insult to your knowledge of the world's map.

It is not wicked to be young—though, years ago, I met people who seemed to think it was; and Queen Marabout might have been much younger without blame and without reproach if—well, if she had behaved better. But her mother had died when the child was very small; when she was fifteen years old her father was killed while boar-hunting.

Fifteen is an early age at which to be crowned Queen, but Marabout was the last person in the world to shrink from occupying an elevated position; and though at first she wept a little for her father's death, she did not try to conceal her delight at the coronation —which took place the day after his Majesty's funeral.

Yes, she was very young, and if you wanted to get into everlasting disgrace at the Court of Lesser Potamia all you had to do was to remind the Queen of her youth. Long before she reached the age of eighteen she had imprisoned or banished or dismissed most of the old court officials, including the chaplains, who had served her father long and faithfully. She wanted younger people about her, she said, and of course she did not find the slightest difficulty in getting ladies and gentlemen as young as, in many cases much younger than, herself. Indeed she preferred that her personal attendants should be her juniors.

So she had thirty or forty maids of honour and young ladies-in-waiting, and a little band of boy pages and young gentlemen-in-waiting—every one of whom ought to have been at school. Of course the Prime-Minister, the Lord Chamberlain, and the other necessary officials were quite grown up—otherwise I don't know what would have become of the kingdom of Lesser Potamia.

Fortunately for the court of Lesser Potamia, the Queen, like most empty-headed persons, was never happy unless she was flying about the world at break-neck speed "enjoying," as she called it, change of air and scene. She said the Court Doctor had told her that travelling was necessary for the maintenance of her

health; the truth being that, like all the other court officials who were left at home, his only chance of obtaining a little rest and peace was to get rid of his royal mistress.

At one time or other the Queen had visited nearly every country in Europe—except her own and the adjacent kingdom of Great Potamia. She knew very much less about any one of them than did the post-boys who rode the horses that pulled her chaise; for as she always put up at the grandest of grand hotels, and rarely left her card-table except to go shopping, and seldom spent more than a day or two in one city, and had no taste for anything except cards and cookery, feathers and chiffon, it seemed to her that there was very little difference indeed between one country and another. What a lover of motor-cars she would have been supposing that in her time such things had been in use!

As she always travelled *incognito,* she never included in her suite more than two ladies-in-waiting, one page and a courier, and you may just imagine what a sorry time of it they had. For the ladies had to act as veritable serving maids, and the boy led the life of an ill-used dog. She knew no language but her own—"not even that," her old governess once declared—and indeed if it had not been for the experienced courier

she always employed I cannot imagine how she could have travelled at all.

Now the reason why her Majesty had never visited Great Potamia was this. The King of that country was a boy of fifteen, and Queen Marabout had quite made up her mind to marry him—when he was eighteen. As I told you before, she liked the people about her to be younger than herself, and she was determined that her future husband should be her junior. Moreover, she often told her maids that though she intended to be Queen of Great Potamia she would take particular care that its ruler did not become even King Consort of her own country. "What is his will be mine," she said, "but what is mine is mine alone."

At Christmas-time the Queen was going home for a court ball on what the newspapers called "a scale of unexampled splendour." Now among the things that she was really fond of, dress easily took the lead. She pretended to "adore" any number of objects; but as her uncle, the old Cardinal-Archbishop, once told her, the only person she was really in love with was herself. His Eminence was promptly exiled.

It is possible that the Queen loved dress just because she was so much in love with herself; at any rate, she certainly did adore fine clothes. What is more, she "very nearly rather liked" anybody who suggested a

new fashion. As a rule, however, she invented her own robes and confections.

For a dress for the grand State ball we have mentioned she one morning told her ladies that she had conceived the most brilliant idea that ever entered the brain of a Queen. As she began to explain it to them in detail they all sat spellbound—as well they might.

"The dress will be entirely of feathers," said the Queen, "the feathers of birds—chiefly singing birds. Blackbirds, thrushes, nightingales, blackcaps, bullfinches, meadow-warblers, robins—each will contribute a flounce. The skirt will be of wings, but for the bodice we shall reserve the breast feathers. We have not yet made up our mind whether to have a belt made of robins' or of bullfinches' breasts. Which do you suggest, ladies?"

But though all the girls had their mouths wide open not one of them could say anything but "Oh!"

"Yes, isn't it a lovely idea?" asked the Queen, who quite misunderstood the "Oh!" chorus, and thought all her ladies were in ecstasies. "But which pink do you recommend for a belt, Lady Rose? Both are so pretty, it is rather hard to choose, is it not?"

"It is indeed, madame," answered Lady Rose with a gasp, "but—but——"

"Well?" asked the Queen. "Don't stutter in our presence—if you please."

"I humbly beg your Majesty's pardon," said the maid of honour, "but—but—but——"

"What! you're stuttering again!" shouted the Queen, slapping the girl's bare arms: all the ladies wore sleeveless frocks so that the Queen could the more easily slap their arms.

"Begging your Majesty's pardon," said Lady Rose desperately as she rubbed her arms, "but your Majesty *can't* kill robins."

"Can't? *can't?* CAN'T? ? ?" exclaimed Marabout, punctuating each interrogation with a slap on Lady Rose's face; "do you dare to tell us that there is any thing we can't do?"

"No, no!—oh no, your Majesty, of course not," cried the now weeping Lady Rose. "Of course, if your Majesty wants robins, your Majesty must have them."

"We should just think so," said the Queen with a laugh. "In fact your impertinent remark has helped us to make up our royal mind. Our belt shall be composed of robins' breasts. We will reserve the bullfinches for a collarette. But how very glum you all are!" continued the Queen, looking round upon her ladies. "Ah, we quite understand: you are all as jealous as you can be. You are envious of our superior

cleverness and inventiveness, we suppose. Well, no wonder. However, you may all go now. Send to us the Lord Chamberlain and the Master of the Royal Pages. The birds have yet to be killed."

When the maids of honour and ladies-in-waiting left the royal presence they talked to one another for over two hours without stopping. And as they all shouted at once and nobody listened, you may imagine the kind of confusion that reigned in the ladies' quarters. Yet this was a small family tea-party compared with the row that went on that same evening in the dormitory of the pages and the young gentlemen-in-waiting. For the boys had been interviewed by the Lord Chamberlain and their own Master, and a list of the birds they had to begin to shoot on the following morning was already posted up on the wall of the guard-room. Before they went to bed they each and all resolved that not one little bird should be shot by them.

The Chamberlain was a gentleman of rank who had been a great favourite of the Queen's father. He was of middle age, and his experience of court life was ripe and particular. The ruling of royal personages he had made into an exact science, or if you like, into the finest of fine arts. His leading principle was to agree with everything they said, to promise that everything

they commanded should be done immediately, and then —to do what he knew would be best.

So when the Queen told him how many hundreds of singing birds she required for her ball-costume, he did not express the smallest surprise, but answered her Majesty that the finding and killing of so many songsters was just the easiest thing in the world, and that he would lose no time in distributing to the boys the necessary bows and arrows.

The Master of the Pages was quite a different sort of man. In the royal presence he did nothing but bow and smile: out of it he did little but grumble and growl. He was supposed to teach the three R's to the pages: and this he did indifferently well. As a disciplinarian he was not particularly notable; but then, as he said (to the Queen's face), her Majesty was such an admirable ruler of all her subjects, including the pages, that his own office was a sinecure. Behind the Queen's back he was wont to say that boys who were constantly being thumped, boxed, smacked, often enough put in irons or set in the stocks, had nearly all the punishment that could be got into a day's work.

On the following morning when the two officials met, they both looked thoughtful, and walked together in perfect silence until they reached the courtyard of the castle. The Chamberlain was the first to speak.

"I suppose your young wretches will be only too delighted with this royal order?" he asked. "The destructive little beasts will just kill off every bird in the countryside."

The Master smiled and shook his head; then after a pause he remarked: "Your lordship has some knowledge of Queens, but, if I may say so, your understanding of boys is imperfect."

"Do you mean to say that they will refuse to do the Queen's bidding?"

"They have already done so."

"She'll have them all hanged—to a boy."

"Don't think she will," said the Master. "They are nearly all noble, and their parents would appeal to the King of Great Potamia. You know, my lord, what our army is like."

"One hundred and twenty-three men, all told," mused the Chamberlain. "Yes, you are right. Besides, the one person on earth she really fears—and hopes some day to marry—is the young King of Great Potamia. All the same, you know, something's got to be done."

"Yes, I suppose something's got to be done; but you may bet your gold stick the boys won't do it. No, my lord, you'd better go to your chamber and think something out."

"Can't you have an epidemic—measles, for instance?"

"Afraid it won't do. You see when she ordered those sixteen boys to get forty lashes apiece we had to go in for whooping-cough. That is so recent that if we had another epidemic she might be suspicious."

"Ah," whispered the Chamberlain, "I shall have to send for old Magus, the jester's uncle."

The Chamberlain and Magus were sitting together in consultation in one of the former's apartments, high up in the southwestern tower. A beautiful room it was, hung with ancient tapestry in which the green and gold and crimson glistened in the noon-day sun. From the Gothic windows there was a view of quite one-half of the entire kingdom of Lesser Potamia.

"To kill so many birds at once is of course quite out of the question," Magus was saying. "The crops were bad enough last year, my lord, but such wholesale destruction would inevitably lead to a famine. No birds, no corn; no birds, no fruit: that is what it would mean, my lord."

"I know it," said the Chamberlain, sadly, "I know it well. Moreover, I fear the people would rise in rebellion."

"If they did not revolt on account of the killing of the birds they would certainly do so when they found

that their crops were ruined. You see, my lord, they have already been greatly tried by her Majesty's—may I call it *erratic* conduct?"

"You certainly may," answered the Chamberlain. "You could not find a milder word for such extraordinary doings as hers. Between ourselves I sometimes think——" here the Chamberlain got up, opened his door and looked down the stairway outside. Then he returned and for half-an-hour or more the two men spoke in whispers. They were not plotting against the Queen—they were much too honest and loyal to do that; but they were considering what would be best and wisest to do supposing some day her Majesty's subjects should rise in rebellion. They both came to the conclusion that the only possible thing would be to beg the help of the King of Great Potamia.

However, this did not assist the poor Chamberlain in the matter of the Queen's ball-dress of feathers.

"I must think it out," said Magus when his companion harked back to the original question. "It is such a large order that at this moment I cannot see my way to help you. But I will go back to my hut and consider it. Could your lordship ride over and see me just after sunset?"

The Chamberlain said he could and would. And he did. Though he had ridden his horse thither at a fast

trot, he returned to the castle at a gallop, and the groom who relieved him of his steed declared that his lordship whistled and sang all the way upstairs to his apartments in the tower.

Everybody at the ball said, truly enough, that such a costume as that of Queen Marabout's had never before been seen in any age of the world's history. Some, however, were struck dumb with admiration—so the Queen thought. When she asked them pointedly how they liked her unique creation, they replied that words entirely failed them when they tried to express their feelings. Yet, strangely enough, once they had left the castle they could talk of nothing else. In fact, the Queen's feather-costume became the talk of Lesser Potamia, and you may be sure that whatever was discussed in that country soon became the favourite topic of Great Potamia.

The secret was shared by only a few very reliable people. For the truth is that not one single small bird had been killed to furnish feathers for the Queen's ball-dress. The materials used for the costume by the Queen's dressmakers were just the feathers of geese and turkeys, dyed and painted to resemble the plumage of the robin, the bullfinch, the thrush, and all the other birds she had mentioned.

For, as you know, at Christmas-time the slaughter of geese and turkeys in Lesser Potamia is enormous, and, as Magus had told the Chamberlain, to buy up their feathers, big and little, and to dye them appropriately would be a comparatively easy operation. Magus himself superintended the entire business, and the result was in every way satisfactory. The dressmakers were not in the secret, for as they had stipulated that every feather should come into their hands ready dried and cured, and as not one of them could have distinguished the plumage of a plover from that of an owl, they were the last people in the world to be suspicious.

The young jester knew the secret, of course, and so did his friend the cook; but not one of the pages or the maids of honour was aware that every feather in the Queen's dress had come from the poultry-yard. They had been bought wholesale, said my Lord Chamberlain, and the statement was a true one. When somebody remarked to the jester that there must have been a lot of killing, he replied, "Yes, and by villains of the deepest *dye*."

"And what about those four negro pages?" somebody else asked him.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "*corkers*, weren't they? *Sooted* the colour of the Queen's dress—didn't they?"

CHAPTER III

QUEEN MARABOUT'S DIFFICULTIES

His Majesty the King of Great Potamia had promised to pay Queen Marabout a visit; but as she was so rarely at home, and as he was not particularly fond of paying visits, they had not met since she was a girl of ten, and he a little lad of seven. And as he was now only fifteen, of course there was no sort of hurry, and she would take great care that his Majesty should visit her in state before ever she set foot in his kingdom.

Now the court officials, particularly the Secretary of State and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, were feeling very anxious about this forthcoming marriage. Indeed they heartily wished that the King and Queen might at least become engaged, for to say truth her Majesty's money-bags were getting very empty, and so many of the best people had gone to live in Great Potamia that how to raise the enormous sums of money the Queen constantly demanded, the Chancellor of the Exchequer simply could not imagine. They had reduced the army until its dimensions had become those of a guard of honour, and as to the navy—well, when I

tell you that it consisted of one pleasure-barge, one sailing yacht, and one gunboat, you will understand. The salaries of the officials were all in arrears, and the Queen's debts to dressmakers, milliners, and tailors were simply enormous. The very handsome liveries worn by the pages had not been paid for for three or four years, and when you hear that the court tailors had to design a new doublet for each boy every three months, and that every suit had to be of a distinctive colour, you will get an idea of the colossal size of the tailors' bills.

"You really must not expect me to remember your wretched names," the Queen had said to the pages at the beginning of her reign. "You shall each have a suit of a different colour, and I shall call you Scarlet, Crimson, Purple, Green, Blue, Yellow, Pink, and so on." Similarly the young ladies were called Lady Rose, Lady Mauve, Lady Cerise, and the rest.

Now as some of these boys and girls had names that the writing of took up nearly half a sheet of notepaper, you may imagine what their feelings were; but then at the court of Lesser Potamia nobody was supposed to have any feelings except the Queen herself. Moreover, as she fancied that she had an eye that was exceedingly sensitive to colour—the lads had to group themselves in a certain order, and woe betide the unfortunate boys

whose colour sense was not educated or who forgot their exact position in the royal circle.

So it was no wonder that the confabulations of the Chamberlain and the Chancellor became frequent and prolonged. Almost at any hour you might see them striding up and down the inner courtyard of the castle, talking together in a low voice and trying in vain to hit upon some plan of raising money without adding to the existing weight of the taxes.

One morning they were joined by the Master of the Pages and proceeded to take him into their confidence. His almost immediate suggestion that her Majesty should be strongly advised to reduce the number of her pages and gentlemen-in-waiting was received with laughter.

"Why that was the very first thing I proposed to the Queen," said the Chancellor, "and she immediately told me that that was the very last thing she would ever dream of consenting to. Then I hinted that perhaps her ladies-in-waiting were somewhat in excess; but she grew so angry that really if I hadn't stepped back a pace or two I believe she would have hit me a blow on the head with her heaviest sceptre."

"Well, well," sighed the Chamberlain, "we must look up old Magus again. Though he is the uncle of a fool, he is by no means a fool of an uncle. I suppose

the farther away from courts and cities a man gets the more clearly he can think. We must send the Fool for the Wise Man."

"By the way," asked the Master, "where is the Court Fool to-day?"

"Ah, I'm glad you remind me. He's in the stocks, and I think I may venture to release him."

The Court Jester was a boy of sixteen, and supposed to be one of the Queen's favourites; yet this did not save him from her Majesty's displeasure, particularly if he failed to make the right kind of jest, or showed himself unskilful in composing flattering speeches. He had asked a riddle the night before—"Why is Lesser Potamia all table-land?" and when everybody, including the Queen, gave it up, he answered, "'Cos you can cover it with a table-cloth." Everybody laughed except her Majesty; she was furious, and ordered him to spend the night in the stocks.

"Well, he's in good company," said the Master, as he and the Chamberlain walked on to an inner court where stood the stocks and whipping-post, the pillory and wooden horse. "She had one of my boys laid by the heels this morning."

As the officials came in sight of the stocks the two prisoners immediately set up a whining cry—though

a moment before they had been laughing and pelting one another with nutshells.

"Oh, my Lord Chamberlain," called out the young jester, "won't you come and draw some *whines* from the wood?"

"Better leave you to mature in the wood, I'm thinking," laughed the Chamberlain—who, however, was already turning over his big bunch of keys.

"Hurrah for my Lord Chamberlain!" shouted the page.

"Don't you get hollering till you're *out* o' the wood," the clown remarked. "My lord didn't say he was going to let *you* out o' the stocks. Besides, you ain't been here all night."

"O, my lord, please let me out!" cried the page. "I haven't done anything really, my lord. I only yawned when we were on duty this morning, and that was because the Queen kept us up so late last night."

"This is your affair, rather than mine," said the Chamberlain to the Master as he unlocked the stocks.

"Come along, boys," said the Master, lifting the heavy oak board and releasing the feet of the two lads. "You go and wash yourself and make your hair tidy," he said to the page.

"Have you had any breakfast?" the Chamberlain asked the jester.

"Well, my lord," grinned the youngster, rubbing his aching ankles, "I did happen to catch a bird—on the wing, so to say."

"You caught a bird and ate it—raw?"

The grin broadened as the clown said in a low voice: "'Twasn't exactly *raw,* my lord. 'Twas a bird the cook threw at me—to keep me quiet, he said. So I just caught it and ate it."

"Hum!" laughed the Chancellor, "I don't suppose it was a roasted sparrow."

"No, my lord, 'twasn't. In fact, 'twas a roasted pheasant. The cook's fond of trying to make game of me, my lord."

"Well, well! But now cease your fooling and be the wise lad you are capable of being. I want to see your uncle, Magus—at once. Do you think you can bring him to the castle by noon-day?"

"If he ain't blown himself up with those chemicals of his I can, my lord."

"Both of you will be blown up if you're not here by twelve o'clock."

"And if we are, my lord, you'll give us both a good blow-out, eh?"

"Get along with you, you vulgar boy!" laughed the Chamberlain. "You're too fat by half for a jester. What you need is exercise. Now, off you go!"

With a bow that was half a grimace the lad ran off to find his uncle, who lived about a mile from the castle. A notable man and reputed to be a magician and a wizard was the jester's uncle; but as a matter of fact he was nothing more than a naturalist and a chemist with a fancy for making experiments. The country folk stood in awe of him, it is true, and he was glad of that; it saved him a great deal of time. He was too fond of literature and science to care very much for mere gossip, and when particularly daring people now and then came to consult him, he told them quite plainly that he had not the slightest knowledge of the future—except what Holy Church had taught him and them. In fact he was a good, pious man who only asked to be left alone to say his prayers in peace, to study nature, and to make experiments in chemistry.

Yet the people would have it that he was a wise man, and so he was; but wise with quite a different and much higher sort of wisdom to that with which they credited him. For he was a reader and a thinker, and, as he often told his nephew, he hoped one day to discover something that would prove a benefit to his fellow-men. Great friends were he and the Lord Chamberlain—who was already indebted to him for much advice and help. In fact the people at the castle were getting into the

habit of referring to him in all their numerous difficulties.

Thus when the Queen one day ordered a dinner of crocodile soup, elephant steaks, lion collops, and tiger chops, though the Chamberlain had told her Majesty that nothing could be simpler or easier—the country did not contain even a menagerie—the cook immediately disguised himself as a beggar in order to run away. However, the jester said to him, "Don't be in a hurry: let me fetch my uncle."

So Magus had come to the castle, and with the help of bull-beef and goat's flesh and some very nasty chemicals, a wild beast dinner was punctually served to the Queen—who declared that though wild animals ought to be tender, as a matter of fact they were not, and on the whole she thought beef and mutton, lamb and veal, poultry and game were preferable.

Then there was that affair of the four black boys she commanded the Chamberlain to order, so that the effect of a new dress with a train thirty-five yards long might not be marred by being held and carried by any four of her own pages with their red and white complexions and their gorgeous clothes. Now there was not a black boy to be had either for love or money in the entire kingdom, and in those days there were no Army and Navy Stores, no Whiteley or Lewis.

Yet after a few minutes' talk with Magus, and after Magus had spent a couple of hours within the precincts of the castle, four boys with frizzy hair and with faces and hands as black as ebony were very much at the Queen's service; and though the black came off their hands and quite spoiled a breadth of the light-coloured silk worn by the Queen, there was such a length of train between them and her Majesty that she was completely unconscious of the fraud, and congratulated the Chamberlain upon the superior and shining blackness the young niggers exhibited. If only she could have seen them—and others—grinning! For the quartet consisted of two boys from the stables and two scullions from the kitchen.

And of course the stable-lads and kitchen-boys did not mind having their hands and faces blacked, for the latter were too well used to the colour to object to it, and the former said it washed off much quicker than did harness blacking. Besides, it was a rare holiday for them to assist at a State ball, or at any other court function—though their arms did ache whenever they were called upon to carry all those yards and yards of train. Indeed they said they much preferred the famous feather costume, because it was not only lighter but its train had to be removed before the Queen could dance.

CHAPTER IV

JOEL THE SILVERSMITH

How Prince Olaf chose for his birthday present a pair of silver shoon; how he received them on Christmas Eve and wore them at Midnight Mass; how on Christmas Day he visited the Carmelite priory and saw for the first time a great crowd of poor waiting for their dole; how on the following day he left his shoes in the crib that stood in the Carmelite church, begging that they might be sold in order to buy sabots for the poor children of the city—all this has been told. But what became of Olaf's shoes after he had placed them close to the manger?

For on that day of the holy martyr Stephen when the Prince had made the sacrifice of them to the sweet Child Jesus, they had at once been placed in the hands of the Father Prior. And as the winter was an exceptionally severe one, though the day was a festival and every shop in the city was closed, the Prior sent for the silversmith, begging him for love of the Holy Child to come to the priory in order to value the work of his own hands, and if possible to dispose of it in order that Prince Olaf's wish should be carried out as speedily as might be.

Sad to say, the silversmith, whose name was Joel, though a consummate artist was a bad man. He went to the priory and at once began to point out to the Prior that the value of such articles as silver shoes was exceedingly small. Who except the Prince would care to have them? he asked. How few boys in the entire kingdom would either wish or dare to be shod with silver? He would offer his Reverence the Prior a fair price for them, he said, but they were worth only the value of the metal. He would have to melt them down, for in their present shape they would stand unsold in his shop forever.

Now all this seemed very reasonable to the Prior, who was a simple godly man, with small knowledge of precious metals, other than the gold of the chalice and paten he handled at Holy Mass. Yet even he ventured to point out to Joel that the shoes were heavy and solid, and that having been fashioned by the court silversmith for the King's own son, it was reasonable to suppose that they were made of the best and purest silver obtainable, and that such a weight of metal was in itself worth a considerable sum.

If the Prior had been observant he would have noticed that his words caused the silversmith to look embarrassed and confused; for as a matter of fact, though Joel had used the very best silver for the upper parts

of the shoes, the thick soles and heels were of quite inferior metal. Yet he had declared to the King that the finest quality of silver had been used for every portion of the work, and had charged accordingly.

Joel saw that he must be very careful. The King and the Prior were friends, and it was quite certain that his Majesty had permitted his son to give away the shoes. It was possible that the King would enquire at what price they had been sold: it seemed quite certain that the young Prince would ask how many pairs of sabots had been bought with the money. To run down the quality of his own material was impossible; yet to buy back the articles as though every ounce of them was of the finest quality of silver would be ruinous. Still anything would be better than risking the royal displeasure, or rousing the suspicions of the Prior.

"It is necessary that I should make a close and careful calculation," said the wily Joel, "so I pray your Reverence to give me time. My bookkeeper is away during these days, and I cannot now remember the price the King paid me for the shoes. Not for the world would I cheat the poor, and I certainly think you may venture to order—say a thousand pairs of sabots."

"That I have already done," said the Prior, "and

indeed much more, for, as I told the Prince, the price of the silver will provide much more than wooden shoes: I hope to get warm clothing for my poor, sheepskins, and leather jerkins, and thick hose."

Joel's face fell, and this time the Prior noticed it.

"You have already ordered these things, Father Prior?"

"Certainly," answered the Prior.

"Ah, that is a pity: I could have bought them for you at a cheaper rate than your Reverence can buy them."

Joel could not conceal his disappointment. He had thought that even if he had to give a fair price for the silver shoes, by making a contract with the Prior for the sabots he could get a profit big enough to recover his loss upon the silver. He had already determined to buy up all the wooden shoes in the city and to put his own price upon them. And here this stupid Father Prior had, consciously or unconsciously, checkmated him!

"You see, Father Prior," said Joel, pointing to a small dint in one of the shoes, "though the Prince wore them for little more than a day he has damaged them seriously. Even if some young nobleman wished to have them, I could not sell them as new goods. But of course, it is most unlikely that anybody will ever buy

them. If his Highness had worn them for a longer time they might have become the fashion, at any rate for boys of rich parents: as it is, no one will ever know that the Prince has worn them."

"I do not expect you to give me the price the King paid for them," said the Prior gently, "but I may say that his Highness expects that they will fetch a goodly sum."

Joel felt that he was caught. It was quite possible the Prior knew exactly what the King had given for the articles. What a pest it was when great people made friends of religious men!

All the same, as the silversmith walked back to the shop that was also his dwelling-house, he smiled wickedly as he dwelt upon several very comforting reflections. For though he saw that he would be compelled to give a big sum for the silver sabots that reposed beneath his fur cloak, he was perfectly certain that he would soon be able to sell them at a fancy price. Why, he reminded himself with a chuckle, the very fact that the Prince had worn them for a day or more greatly increased their value. Moreover, not only was his Highness much loved, but as soon as the people heard the story of his going to the Carmelite church and leaving his costly shoes in the crib, there would be a great burst of enthusiasm—not only in the city but

throughout the country, and all the rich people in the land would crowd to his shop if only to gaze upon what would certainly have an historical value, if not indeed a sacred one.

"Yes, yes," muttered Joel to himself as he unlocked the door of his shop and proceeded to put the shoes in one of his strongest lockers, "who knows but that some day these things will be regarded as precious, perhaps even as priceless relics?"

He laughed scornfully as he spoke, for Joel was one of those despicable men who are so in love with vice that they deny the possibility of virtue in others. Yet he knew that already the people were disposed to speak of Prince Olaf as a holy boy, and the incident of St. Stephen's Day would certainly tend to encourage their notion of Olaf's sanctity. Undoubtedly the day would come when these silver shoon would be worth their weight in gold.

"And if I cannot get them out of that silly old Prior for thirty gold pieces, I am a fool," mused Joel. "And if I let them leave my shop under three hundred, I am a madman."

During the whole of that winter Joel's shop became a place of pilgrimage. As he had foreseen, everybody wanted to look upon the objects that were not only

novel in themselves and of great value, but, through the charity of their sometime owner, had provided warm clothing and sabots for a thousand shivering children. Almost every week a substantial offer for them was made to Joel, but he had already put up the price, declaring that they should never leave his shop for less than five hundred gold pieces. Had he not been compelled to give fifty to the Prior?

Joel was a rich man, one of the richest in the city, and he could afford to wait for his price. The longer he waited the more valuable would the relic become, for in spite of his practical atheism he now looked upon the shoes as a relic. Though he could not then foresee that the Prince would one day become a Carmelite friar, he felt sure that the repute of sanctity would always cling to his Highness. Moreover, if Olaf never actually became a saint the shoes would always be a relic of royalty and objects of historical interest. Poets had already sung the Prince's good deed, and historians were not likely to overlook it.

It was in the December following, and on the feast of St. Nicholas, that a report spread throughout the city that the shop of Joel the silversmith had been robbed, and that among the valuables carried off by the thieves were the silver shoes that had belonged to Prince Olaf.

Already Joel was with the Burgomaster and two of his young apprentices had been put in prison on suspicion of collusion with the robbers. Men-at-arms were sent to scour the surrounding country: several haunts of thieves in the city were raided by officers; no man, woman, or child was permitted to pass out at any of the gates without showing what they carried with them. The robbery had taken place during the night, and the two boy apprentices had been the first to discover it. There did not seem to be the smallest reason to suspect the lads, except that they had seemed distressed and confused when they reported the affair to Joel—a master they feared and dreaded. Indeed they were boys of good character and behaviour, often jeered at by Joel for their piety and their regular attendance at Mass and Office and Guild-meetings.

When the prentices were brought up for trial, Joel himself announced to the court that, thanks to the diligence of his son, some of the articles had already been found hidden in the chamber where the prisoners slept; and among them the famous silver shoon. They had been carefully and cunningly concealed in some old rags, he said, and pushed behind a panel of the wainscoting. Joel submitted that nothing was wanting to prove the prisoners' guilt. When the boys were interrogated by the Burgomaster they could do nothing but

weep: one of them had just turned twelve and the other was barely thirteen.

Somewhat to Joel's annoyance, the magistrates did not seem disposed to send the case to the Assizes. The penalty, of course, was death, and though at that period it was too often imposed, the Burgomaster and his brother magistrates—of whom Joel was one, though he could not sit upon his own case—were men who feared God. Eventually the boys were committed to the Assizes.

The Assizes were opened a week before Christmas, and the trial lengthened itself out until the feast of St. Thomas the Apostle. On that day Joel produced a new witness in the shape of a man who was employed as an assistant. He swore that he had often heard the prisoners talking about the silver shoes, and that the younger boy had said they must be about his size and would probably fit him perfectly. When the witness was asked why he had not appeared at an earlier stage of the trial, he replied that he had been on a journey for his master to take some goods to the court of Lesser Potamia.

With anxious and sorrowful faces the judges consulted together in private. Sadly they admitted to one another that the evidence was dead against the lads, and that though they mistrusted the silversmith there

was nothing for it but to sum up as fairly as possible and then to leave the matter to the jury. Greatly to the sorrow of the Chief-Justice, the jury quickly returned a verdict of guilty.

In passing sentence of death the Judge could not control his tears. "It wants but a few days to the great festival of Christmas," he said, "and at such a time I should dearly have liked to save this town the spectacle of the public execution of two criminals of such tender age as is yours. Unhappily, I am compelled to condemn each of you to be taken out of the prison in which you are confined and to be hanged by the neck from the city gallows until you are dead. And in order to save you and others much suffering, I recommend that the execution take place not later than the 23d, that is within forty-eight hours from now. I trust that the good Franciscan friars will be in immediate attendance upon these poor children," he added, "and that between now and the hour of their death they will receive every kind of temporal and spiritual succour that can be rendered them."

Long before the Judge had finished his speech both the boys had swooned and were being held in the arms of their guards. In that condition they were carried back through the weeping crowd to their cells, followed by two Capuchin friars.

Long before darkness fell upon the city the grief of the crowd had turned into anger, and already law-abiding folk were feeling anxious. The streets were full of men and women, talking in high and threatening tones. Curses were showered freely upon Joel the silversmith, and it was noticed that he did not dare to show himself in the streets or to appear in his shop. Fearing that an attack might be made upon him and upon his property, he sent a secret messenger to the Burgomaster, asking for a special guard of men-at-arms. The Burgomaster replied that all the town guards were already ordered out, and that in the present unquiet state of the city no men could be spared to look after the person or property of an individual citizen: but he strongly advised Master Joel to remain indoors.

Meanwhile in a dark vault of the city prison the two condemned prisoners were receiving all the comfort the friars could give them. Though the boys looked pale and haggard, they were now very calm, for they had already made their confessions and were listening attentively to the exhortation of Father Antony. One or two torches lit up the corner of the vault in which they lay side by side on a heap of fresh straw—not so heavily fettered as they had been during the trial, for the kind guards who had carried them back to prison

soon removed the manacles from their hands, together with the iron belts and the gyves which fettered their legs. Each now was only chained by a single shackle on his right ankle.

Though the friars intended to do all they could to get a free pardon for the boys, and though they knew that the Burgomaster had already asked for an audience with the King, it seemed better not to raise in the minds of the children hopes that might never be realised. Moreover, the time was so very short; and not only did the King always dislike to interfere with the course of justice, but he had a habit, sometimes fatal in its consequences, of putting off his petitioners and of temporising until it was too late to act.

So these men of God strove hard to make their poor penitents resigned and forgiving, and with a measure of success that was truly astonishing.

"My dear ones," Father Antony was saying, "I am thoroughly convinced of your innocence: nay, I could not be more convinced if to assure me of it God sent an angel from heaven. Paradise will soon be yours, my children; for be certain that Our Lord will not leave you long in purgatory. This is your purgatory, I truly believe. Don't you think now you are buying eternal happiness cheaply? Just a little more pain

and all is over—nothing but unbroken bliss to look forward to. Ah, my dear ones, how gladly some men would take your place if only they were as young and as innocent as you are."

"But, Father, I have often been naughty," said the younger boy Fritz, "and it was quite true what the assistant said about my talking of the shoes. We talked of them often—all the prentices did—and it was vain of me to say that they would just fit me, though I only said it in fun. Of course I never thought of stealing them."

"No boy ever did, I am certain," said the elder lad. "Of what use would such curious things be to a prentice? He could not wear them, and he dare not sell them. Everybody in Bonhomy knows whose they were and the whole history of them. As for us, Fritz and I, though we have seen them we have never so much as touched them."

"Do not think of them any more," put in Father Paschal. "Think only of the happiness you will soon be enjoying. Think of the dear Lord who is coming to you at daybreak to-morrow. Both Father Antony and I will say Mass here, please God, to-morrow and the day after. I must go now and prepare the altar."

Blessing and embracing the children, Father Paschal

left them with his brother friar, who sat by them praying and talking in a low, soothing tone of holy things—until both the boys fell into a sound, sweet sleep.

Then did Father Antony whisper a fervent thanksgiving, and making the sign of the cross over the slumbering lads, went out softly—weeping as he went.

CHAPTER V

AN ATTACK AND A FLIGHT

Any kind of civil disturbance is the thief's opportunity, and one that he never fails to seize. Greatly as the mob was incensed against Joel the silversmith, it is doubtful if they would have become violent but for the example and incitement of a few desperate scoundrels who were determined to make capital out of the occurrence.

Soon after nightfall the badly-lighted streets became unusually crowded, but when the town-guard began to march up and down with lighted torches, most of the people retired quietly to their homes. Already strong oaken shutters barred with iron covered the one window of Joel's shop, while its thick, nail-studded door was strongly secured from within. No lights appeared in any upstairs window looking upon the street.

By seven o'clock the streets had become so empty that the men-at-arms were ordered to their quarters. Most of the houses were now in darkness. Only from an upper window here and there flickered a solitary light.

To a low quarter of the city, near the river, several stalwart watchmen were sent, but it seemed to them

that this doubtful and dangerous district was quieter than usual. The night was a bitterly cold one, and when, in the small hours of the morning, the watchmen were relieved, they hurried to their homes thanking God that the city slept in peace.

The new watchmen heartily wished that they had been given a lighter and a safer beat than this low-lying stretch of suburbs near the river; for here were few signs of life, saving the occasional splash of oars as boat and barge passed on the deep, dark water. All experienced a sense of loneliness and uncanniness—which seemed to deepen as the night went on, and not so much as a solitary horseman gave them greeting. There was not a star in the heavens above them; there was not a gleam of light upon the water; the hovels they now and then threw the light of their lanterns upon were dark as tombs. Longingly they thought of the city streets where the houses and shops of the living—living, if sleeping—stood so close together, and where ever and anon they would come to a lamp lighted before a shrine of Our Blessed Lady or the statue of a saint.

Even the bells of the monasteries, ringing for Matins and Lauds, scarcely reached their ears to-night, for a strong breeze blew from the river, and the holy sound of church chimes was only faintly heard.

But even as they stood and stamped their feet on the snow a sound did reach them, and one that told of trouble in the city. It was the great bell of the Cathedral, used only on solemn occasions, or as a tocsin of alarm in the night. It meant fire or slaughter, perhaps both.

Hurriedly one watchman called to another through the darkness; hurriedly they met and consulted. City-ward they strained their eyes, but they could see no signs of fire. But then, not only did a great stretch of waste land intervene between them and the city, but meadows and gardens and orchards, some of them thick as a forest with trees.

In a few moments every member of the little band of suburban watchmen had met. "Two of you remain here," said the sergeant quickly; "the rest of us must run to the rescue. The riot, if it be a riot, is likely to be in the neighbourhood of Master Joel's shop. We will cut straight across here, for if I'm not mistaken we are not far from this end of his pleasure-garden."

The man was right. Leading the way straight across the common-land they came to the meadows. Passing through these they were in the silversmith's orchard; beyond this was a great garden that led straight up to the silversmith's house and shop. They were not the first who had found their way thither that winter's night.

The purlieus of the river-bank might well be quiet: the hovels of doubtful men might well be dark. Hours ago a band of desperate villains had crept out of their dwellings—one by one and at intervals of time, so as not to attract the attention of the watch—and disposed themselves in hiding places in the silversmith's garden.

Earlier in the evening they had seen the barred door and window fronting the street; they would at any rate find if the back of the house was thief-proof. Moreover, so extensive was the garden of Joel, and so high were its side walls, there was much less chance of detection if they found an entry at the back. To get into the garden nothing was easier.

But they had confederates in the city streets. For years Joel's shop had fascinated men who, as in these days, lived by robbing their neighbours, and it was certain that no house in Lamburg contained more marketable treasure than did the silversmith's. Once they gained an entry into this storehouse of valuables they would stick at nothing. They knew that they were running great risks, but they were desperate. Their tools were few and rough; to them the scientific implements of the modern burglar were unknown. They had no firearms, but their daggers were sharp and deadly.

To their disgust they found the silversmith's back door as heavy and as strongly barred as the front door.

It seemed that nothing less than a battering-ram could ever force it open. Their only hope was in the windows. Some of the back premises were low-roofed and irregular in form; their plan was to force an entry through a first-floor window. In one bedroom casement a night-lamp burned dimly; every other window was dark as the night itself.

The roof of what seemed to be a brew-house was easily mounted, and the leader softly crept from this to the eaves of the kitchen. Here to his delight was a small window that opened to his first touch. Cautiously the man entered and flashed his dark lantern into every corner; it contained little besides a bed, but both bed and room were empty. He did not know it, of course, but it was the sleeping-chamber of the two prentice boys who were at that moment lying in prison under sentence of death. Almost before he could give the signal his accomplices were by his side. He had not even used the rope ladder that was twined to his waist.

Already they had made their plans; each man understood what he had to do. Two were never to leave their leader's side unless he bade them do so. The rest were to remain within call until they received special orders. They had reason to believe that Joel slept in the shop itself, and it was the shop they would visit

first. There the three would bind and gag him while the rest would deal with any servant or prentice who might come to his aid. His wife had long been dead, and it was said that his only son had gone on a journey.

So indeed had Joel himself. So had the assistant whose evidence at the recent trial had been of such importance. So had the workmen and apprentices, and all the servants except one old woman and a young girl.

But what affected the robbers most of all was the fact that the shop was nearly empty. The few goods left behind were almost valueless—a few pewter drinking-cups and flagons were all they could lay hands on. They had been very clever, but Joel had been cleverer still. They had come from the river to the back of the house; Joel had gone from the back of his house to the river and to the barge that he kept on it.

Great was the rage of the robbers as they lighted various lamps and explored every corner of the shop and of the workmen's apartments—finding nothing but signs of a hasty packing-up and departure.

"At least he shall never come back, the old swine!" exclaimed the leader with an oath; "we'll burn his sty to the ground."

It was the only vengeance they could wreak, and the deed was easily done. Plenty of loose litter lay on floors and tables—bundles of straw and old packing

cases were everywhere. To drop a lighted lamp upon the floor was all that was necessary. The house and shop were old and half built of timber. In less than half an hour the place was one big blaze.

But it is easier to start a fire of that sort than to limit its effects, and very soon watchmen were running through the streets, rousing the slumbering citizens and warning them that their town was in danger.

Meanwhile, through the darkness of the night Joel's barge was being fast rowed down the silent river to the sea. He was taking a step that he had long meditated. Bonhomy should know him no more. For years his fellow-citizens had regarded him with suspicion, and it seemed to him that the richer he grew the less he was respected. Moreover, popular feeling had been against him very notably since the beginning of the trial —now, from his point of view, so happily concluded. He knew himself to be a murderer, yet hardened in sin as he was he did not wish to see his victims done to death. That last scene in court had shaken his nerves a little, and though he had always hated the two children, he could have wished that they had been a little older and riper ere they made fruit for the tree of death.

His reasons for hating the poor lads were to Joel all sufficient. He hated all good people, young or old, and

the piety and innocence of his two apprentices had always been most offensive to him. But the chief reason for his wishing to get them out of the world was a strong suspicion that they had discovered some of what he called his trade secrets, but what an honest man would have spoken of as base frauds.

Now, as a matter of fact, they knew none of these things. Joel's methods had been too secretive to be discovered by young apprentices who, though their guardians—for they were both orphans—had paid heavy premiums to have them taught the craft of a silversmith, were almost entirely employed in menial work, and in fetching and carrying for others. One thing they did know, and that was that their master was a harsh, cruel man, and one who was never seen on his knees, or within the walls of a church—unless business compelled him to visit some sacristy or shrine.

Joel called himself a Christian, but few or none believed that he had ever been baptised. He would pretend that his health made it necessary that he should get out of the city on all Sundays and holydays, and that it was his habit to row up the river and to hear Mass at one or other of the many churches that lay on either side its banks. That he was fond of the river was a fact, or that early on Sunday mornings he would step on board his fine big barge, was not disputed.

To-night it was doing him good service, this same barge with its state cabin hung about with crimson velvet, its well-cushioned divans, its storerooms for food and wine, and its ample accommodation for all the persons of his shop and household he wished to retain. Heavy with wine, he would have slept if he could have done so, but he could not sleep; for if he fell into a slight doze anxiety and frightening dreams soon awoke him. Being without faith in God, he was of course a prey to every kind of superstition.

Yet within this velvet-wrapped cabin with its silver lamp hanging from the ceiling, and the regular splash of the oars, almost the only sound that reached him, everything seemed peculiarly favourable for deep and refreshing sleep. Only the half-regarded sound of the oars falling into the water—yet surely there was another sound, and to the guilty man who lay on his couch wrapped up to the chin in thick furs, the sound was a menacing one. It was only the noise of the night-wind blowing across the river, but to Joel it sounded like a human cry, the despairing cry of a child that is doomed to death.

Other anxieties weighed upon him. In the sluggish river sailing was smooth and easy; but what would it be at the dawn when he hoped to be on board the vessel that would carry him to Lesser Potamia? He had al-

ways dreaded the Milky Sea in winter, for though nothing could be pleasanter than its white waters sparkling under the summer sun, at this time of the year sudden squalls of wind would break upon it with alarming fury, and many a little sailing vessel went down into its depths. Surely the wind was rising rapidly, he thought. By the time he reached the sea a gale would be blowing! Yet sail he must. With such a cargo as his he dare not remain in port. Moreover, he had pledged himself to be at the court of Queen Marabout on Christmas Eve.

Pouring out another goblet of wine, he reminded himself that, after all, the journey was a very short one, and that once he was safely landed in Lesser Potamia he had nothing to fear. He would have to do with a young Queen, a lady of wealth and of taste. No longer would he be a mere silversmith working in his shop with one or two assistants, but he would be the court goldsmith and Master of the Royal Mint. All his life he had aspired to a part of this kind, but though in Bonhomy he had been the King's silversmith by appointment, he had never lived at court, nor had he ever been allowed to deal with the mint. The King had his own goldsmith; he, Joel, was but a silversmith living in the city. Yet gold was the metal he loved supremely: it was also the metal he delighted to work in.

In truth he was a skilled worker in any kind of metal, and an excellent judge of precious stones. Joel was a first-rate goldsmith—and an excessively wicked man.

He had need to be anxious about the voyage, short as it was, for though he had already transferred to Lesser Potamia several big cargoes of valuable goods, including most of his gold and silverware, the more precious jewelry that was never displayed in the shop, and various other articles of price, including the silver shoes, were now on board the barge. He himself as he lay there muffled in furs was lined with diamonds and rubies, with opals and pearls.

Several times during the past two years Queen Marabout had visited his shop, and though she had at first called herself the Duchess of Bohemia, Joel soon discovered with whom he was dealing. So in an inner room he had shown her Majesty wonderful jewels that rarely saw the light of day, and fascinated her almost as much by his display of knowledge as by his costly wares. Large sums of money she had already paid him when she proposed that he should come to her court and remain there; a little to her surprise he had immediately consented. A good deal to his surprise, Queen Marabout never called upon the King and Queen of Bonhomy; there were reasons of state why

she should preserve her incognito, her Majesty explained.

Not from Queen Marabout's lips did Joel hear that she was going to marry the young King of Great Potamia, but Joel's son heard it from one of the ladies-in-waiting—who had to wait so long in the shop while their royal mistress was engaged within that, after a time, they condescended to a little gossip with the young man.

"Think of that, my lad!" chuckled Joel when he heard the news. "I shall be the leading goldsmith in Great and Lesser Potamia, for after the marriage the two kingdoms are sure to be united. The sooner we're out of this petty little country the better."

CHAPTER VI

THE KING'S PETITIONERS

THE city of Lamberg was not doomed to destruction, for though Joel's shop was burned to the ground, and the houses on either side of it were much damaged, the people worked with such a will to keep the fire from spreading that when the winter dawn began to break the flames were entirely subdued; for a thaw had set in just before daybreak and at eight o'clock heavy rain began to fall.

Excitement in the city was now greater than ever. Everybody was discussing the fate of Joel and his son, and the executions of the morrow. Could there be any connection between these events? people asked one another. Was anything being done for the two lads? Had the King been appealed to?

The King was being appealed to at that very moment; or rather there were three persons already at the castle, two of them waiting patiently enough for an audience, and one of them giving vent to every sort of impatient word and gesture.

"It is perfectly disgusting," the Burgomaster was saying to the two friars, "that a man in good health

should be in bed at such an hour as this. I don't suppose those lackeys have given him one message yet. And when he rises he'll take one whole hour to dress and another for eating and drinking. Reverend Fathers, you must excuse me, but I really cannot wait here all day. I have my business to attend to. Pray tell his Majesty that I will call later in the morning. You can plead the cause of your penitents much better than I can. But don't forget to tell him of Joel's flight, or of the excited state of the populace."

Still grumbling the Burgomaster took his leave, and the friars began to say their Hours.

It was a fact that the King was a very lazy man. Everything happened that the Burgomaster had predicted. More than two hours passed before the King summoned the friars to his presence. His Majesty listened so placidly to their appeal that they were afraid he might fall asleep before they had finished speaking; several times he yawned and closed his eyes, and it was not until Father Antony suddenly fell upon his knees and began to weep that the King roused himself.

"Don't kneel, Father, don't! Get up! Can't hear you if you kneel," said his Majesty, stifling a yawn. "It's good of you to speak for the lads, but we can't do anything, you know. We mustn't interfere with the ends of justice."

Father Francis began to speak rapidly and eloquently enough, and though the King again closed his eyes he did not nap.

"Can't do it, Father: it's bad policy. Do it for one we shall have to pardon every rogue that's sentenced," continued his Majesty. "If they're hanged to-morrow they'll save their souls, I dare say; if we pardon 'em they'll grow up in wickedness and be damned."

It was at this point that the Burgomaster was announced. When the King found that he had come on the same errand his Majesty showed signs of impatience.

"You at any rate ought to know better," said the King to the Burgomaster. "You know what becomes of these young thieves, and you know it's better they should be hanged when they're young. No, don't interrupt. We don't want to hear any more."

But the King had to hear more.

"If your Majesty wants to see the city sacked, I have nothing more to say," said the Burgomaster. "Last night I only prevented an uproar by doubling the town-guard and making the men march through the streets for hours. These holy Fathers have no doubt informed you of Joel's flight and of the burning of his house? Well, your Majesty, if those poor children are hanged I will not answer for the safety of the city, or of your Majesty's person."

"Tut, tut!" exclaimed the King, "you're excited, man. There is nothing to be afraid of. See us to-morrow."

"Long before this time to-morrow, your Majesty, these poor children will be corpses. They are to be hanged at dawn."

"Well, well," said the monarch, "come to the castle later in the day. We must think about it. At present we see no reason for interfering with the course of justice. *You* people believe the boys are innocent; a judge and jury have found them guilty. Now we know nothing about the case but what you tell us; surely the judge and jury are to be trusted?"

At such length did the Burgomaster explain the circumstances—very special and peculiar circumstances he rightly maintained—that the King closed his eyes and nodded. With difficulty the Burgomaster restrained his anger. As a matter of fact the King was not even drowsy. He was disturbed to hear that Joel the silversmith had fled.

"We are going hunting now," said the King, rising: "see us at four o'clock this afternoon."

The friars and the Burgomaster were dismissed.

"I know exactly how it will be," said the Burgomaster angrily as he passed out of the castle with the two Fathers. "He won't be back before four o'clock,

he knows that very well. And when he is back he'll be so tired he'll lie down and fall asleep, and nobody will dare to wake him up till dinner-time; after dinner he won't even see the Secretary of State. It is infamous!"

They had reached the outer gates of the castle, and though the friars felt too sad for speech one of them was about to make some soothing remark to the Burgomaster when, looking up, he saw that the way leading to the drawbridge was filled with an expectant crowd. Somehow or other it had become known that the friars and the Burgomaster had gone to petition the King for the lives of the two apprentices. The crowd was headed by a band of prentice lads of ages varying from twelve to twenty. A great silence fell upon the crowd as the three petitioners approached it.

"What news, Reverend Father?" asked a stalwart youth, stepping forward cap in hand.

The sad faces of the friars and the scowling countenance of the Burgomaster were a sufficient answer.

A low murmur of indignation rose from the crowd—which parted and fell back respectfully as the trio passed along.

"We are to see the King again," the friars went on answering, as they made their way through the throng. "Be sure we and the Burgomaster will do all in our power for the poor boys."

This was all that they felt justified in saying. The Burgomaster would say nothing.

Slowly and sadly the Fathers turned in the direction of the town jail. They must visit the condemned. They must console as best they could. They must give assurance of eternal happiness if they could give no hope of escape from a premature and a violent death.

With swift strides and muttered imprecations the Burgomaster turned toward the Dominican Priory in which the King's youngest son, Prince Olaf, was now known as Brother Aquinas.

"We have only just heard this dreadful news," the Prior was saying to the Burgomaster. "Indeed the sub-prior and I were considering whether we should tell Brother Aquinas or not. Of course it will give him the keenest distress, but if you think his intercession with the King his father will avail, he shall be sent to the castle at once, and I myself will accompany him."

"It is of no use going until late in the afternoon, Father Prior," said the Burgomaster, "the King has gone a-hunting. As we passed through the courtyard just now we saw his horses standing ready. Whether it will be of any use going at four o'clock, I am not sure."

"We shall certainly go," answered the Prior. "If any living person can touch the King's heart, that person is his youngest son."

"I shall be there, Father, and so will the two Franciscan chaplains," said the Burgomaster as he took his leave.

When the Prior told the news to the young novice-prince the boy wept bitterly.

"Oh, Father Prior," he cried, "the fault seems to be all mine. If I hadn't had those silver shoes nobody could ever have been accused of stealing them, could they? Surely my father will not let those poor boys be hanged! Even if they were guilty it would be dreadful to punish them with death; but if they are innocent, as so many people say they are, it is too horrible to think of. Oh, I will not leave my father until he has promised to pardon them. If they were executed I should feel like a murderer; I should never be happy again."

"My child," said the Prior solemnly, "you are taking a wrong view of the matter. There is no fault on your part. It is clear from this and many other things that Joel is a scoundrel, and if he had not brought a false accusation against the lads in regard to the shoes he would probably have charged them with stealing something else. For some reason or other he wanted to be rid of them, so it seems, and now that he has fled the country he feels secure."

Many a prayer and penance did Brother Aquinas

offer up that day; longingly he looked forward to the visit he was to pay to the King his father at sunset.

The rain that had fallen so heavily in the early morning ceased long before noon; but at two o'clock a thick mist drifted up from the river and the December twilight fell early. Soon the streets of the city were filled with white fog, through which lamps shone dimly, and torches flashed fitfully.

A sense of unrest seemed to pervade the town, and though the crowd in the streets was not great, on all hands people were asking themselves what was happening, or what was going to happen.

At the hour of Vespers the churches were unusually full, and though many joined devoutly in singing the antiphon of the day, "O King of the Gentiles, yea, and Desire thereof," many thought of the "Great O" of a preceding day: *"O King of David, and Sceptre of the house of Israel; That openest and no man shutteth; and shuttest and no man openeth: come to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death."*

In their private prayers when Vespers were over many a holy man and devout woman added this antiphon to their petitions for the condemned boys.

Night fell and the fog thickened ere people left the

church. But no sooner did they reach the narrow streets than they were aware of a strange stir in the city—a hurried movement of the crowd in one direction —a clamour of many voices—finally a great shout of joy.

"*They're free! They're free!*" was the cry that now passed from street to street. Cheer upon cheer rose upon the foggy air. A thousand questions were asked, and all were answered by the words, "They're free! They're free! Hurrah! No gallows for bairns!"

But an hour later a man who was hurrying posthaste from the castle, a burly man who was not immediately recognised by the crowd, heard these strange words, and stopping the first group of men he met demanded to know the meaning of all this rejoicing. It was the Burgomaster, who had just left the King's antechamber, after waiting there since four o'clock in company with the Dominican Prior and the two Capuchin friars. The novice-prince had been sent for by the Queen his mother. The King was said to be in consultation with one of his ministers. Time was passing all too quickly, and at length the impetuous Burgomaster, thinking that he heard an unusual clamour outside the castle, left the antechamber hastily and without an attendant.

No sooner had he put his question to the group than he was recognised.

"It's the Burgomaster!" exclaimed one of the men, and immediately took to his heels, followed by his comrades. The fog instantly swallowed them up, and the Burgomaster stood helpless and raging.

"Saving my duty to the King and to the people," he growled to himself, "I could almost say that I'm glad. Bah! but I *am* glad." He laughed bitterly and harshly as he turned his steps back to the castle. He quite understood what had happened. Thinking that he, the Burgomaster, was safe at the castle, and knowing that his Majesty had a habit of keeping petitioners waiting until it was too late for them to act, the mob had got into the city prison and given the boys their liberty.

"Saving my duty I cannot regret it," he said to himself as he regained the castle entrance. "And at this moment my duty is clear. I am in attendance upon his Majesty. Moreover, I know nothing of the matter—officially. Before I leave the castle no doubt one of my men will come to me. Anyhow, nothing can be done. The lads are miles away by this time, I warrant."

Though several could have made an excellent guess, not a soul in the city knew exactly where the two children were. Under cover of the fog they had been carried down to the water-side and put into a boat which,

rowed by four stalwart young men, had shot up the river at a rapid pace. They were making for an Abbey which had the privilege of sanctuary; once within its walls the boys could not be retaken.

Just as the Burgomaster reached the antechamber, a lord-in-waiting entered with a message from the King. The message was to the effect that his Majesty was greatly fatigued; that business of state would keep him engaged until a late hour; that in the circumstances he could not think of detaining the Reverend Fathers and his honour the Burgomaster. In short, the petitioners were dismissed.

The Burgomaster bowed, low-grinding his teeth the while.

The Capuchin friars bowed and turned away without a word.

The Dominican Prior bowed and said: "I am in attendance upon Prince Olaf, now Brother Aquinas. I shall take the liberty of remaining here until his Highness is ready to return to the Priory."

The lord-in-waiting bowed profoundly and withdrew.

"Listen, Reverend Fathers," began the Burgomaster, turning to the friars with a strange smile. "The birds have flown! The snare is broken and they are delivered. While we have been dancing attendance

upon the King the people have taken the matter into their own hands."

"*Deo Gratias!*" was the exclamation that escaped simultaneously from three pairs of lips.

"*Deo Gratias!*" was the broken cry of the novice-prince, who at that very moment returned to the ante-chamber—bathed in tears.

CHAPTER VII

THE KING OF GREAT POTAMIA

We have already said that the Kingdom of Great Potamia was an important one. Many times bigger than Bonhomy and Lesser Potamia put together, though it was only one of the states which in these times form part of a large empire, it was of considerable extent, rich in all natural resources, and possessed of an army and an exchequer commensurate with its dignity.

Its young King Hermann was a boy of great promise. Though far from being faultless he had reached his fifteenth year without showing any vicious tendencies, while his affectionate devotedness to his mother was an example to every boy and girl in the land. "I obey God and my mother," was his watchword, and certainly in this royal lady he had a wise and a holy mentor. She was the eldest daughter of the King of Bonhomy and had lost her husband in the second year of their married life.

Though Hermann had long ago succeeded he was not yet crowned; at his own earnest entreaty the ceremony had been put off until he reached his sixteenth year.

Meanwhile he was showing a keen and intelligent interest in state affairs, and greatly endearing himself to his counsellors by his willingness in listening to advice, and his readiness to study difficult questions of home and foreign policy.

Now in Great Potamia there were several political parties—one of which was constantly clamouring for the annexation of Lesser Potamia and Bonhomy. Another and a powerful party opposed this notion, declaring that Great Potamia was quite big enough for one king to govern, and that if ever Bonhomy and Lesser Potamia were added to it, discord would immediately be lord of all. The boy-king listened to both parties and held his peace.

Tall, well-made, keen-eyed, Hermann looked every inch the king and the soldier. A splendid horseman, a bold hunter, and at this time as well skilled in the use of weapons of war as of those of sport, he was loved by his people and worshipped by those who were near his person.

"If his Majesty never forgets that he is a king, he always remembers that he is but a boy," often said the Cardinal-Archbishop, who was one of his guardians. "I doubt if he will ever remember to use the first person plural: with him it is always *I;* never we. May he long continue to be the good, pure-hearted lad he un-

doubtedly is! And may God long preserve the Queen-Mother!"

As the King had already kept his fifteenth birthday the Queen and court were beginning to think about the great function of the coronation. His Majesty had suggested Christmas as an appropriate feast for such a ceremony, but when the Queen reminded him of the long journeys many of the guests would have to make, and the royal personages who would have to cross the sea in order to reach Great Potamia, the King immediately declared that no time could be better than the Pentecost of the coming year.

"I shall be six months older then, mother dear. Of course I know that even then I shan't be a man, but that can't be helped, can it?"

"The good God has made you a king, my darling," she said as she kissed his lips, "and the same good God can give to a boy-king the wisdom of a man. Ask Him for it daily, my son."

The King was silent for a moment and then asked: "How often may the Mass of the Holy Ghost be said in our chapel?"

"We will ask the Cardinal, my love," answered the delighted mother. "There are many days upon which votive Masses may be said, and of course the Mass of the Holy Ghost can be said on any one of them."

"Then, mother dear, will you ask the Dean of the Chapel to have this Mass said on all possible days, from now until the coronation?"

The Cardinal was greatly pleased when he heard of this request.

"Certainly our young King is going the right way to work," said his Grace to the Dean of the Royal Chapel. "He may never be a saint like his young Uncle Olaf, the Dominican, but there is every prospect of his growing up a God-fearing and a pious man."

"Your Eminence's mention of Prince Olaf, or Brother Aquinas as we must call him now, reminds me of a curious item of news I have just received from a relative of mine, a chaplain at the court of Lesser Potamia. He tells me that Queen Marabout has bought the famous silver shoes of the Prince, and that she has worn them at a court function; though, he adds—if your Grace will pardon so frivolous an item of gossip—that she got them on with such difficulty, and suffered so much when they were on, that she soon had to retire in order to have them removed."

The Cardinal frowned. From all sorts of persons his Eminence was constantly hearing stories of Queen Marabout, and he was getting a little tired of them.

"But that is not all," went on the chatty Dean, not noticing the Cardinal's face. "She has taken into her

court the famous silversmith Joel, the maker of these renowned shoes, who, they say, fled from Bonhomy in the night and is now the court goldsmith of Lesser Potamia and Master of the Royal Mint."

"And why did the man run away from Bonhomy?" asked the Cardinal, who was getting interested in the matter in spite of himself.

"Well, Eminence, it is said that this Joel falsely accused his two young prentice boys of stealing the silver shoes, and that by dint of bribing the jury and getting his underlings to swear falsely, the lads were condemned to death. This so incensed the people of the city that Joel was in danger and was glad to get away under cover of the darkness. Others say that his leaving Bonhomy was only a question of time, inasmuch as he had already accepted the post offered to him by Queen Marabout. Anyway Joel is now at the court of Lesser Potamia and is already making his influence felt among the officials. Indeed they say that the Queen refers questions of state to him, and that the Lord Chamberlain, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the Prime-Minister are all on the point of resigning."

"I thought," said the Cardinal to himself as he left the sacristy, "I thought Queen Marabout was just a silly girl, fond of gadding about, too fond of dress, and

much too fond of having her own way. Alas! I fear she is also mischievous. Foolish folk do much harm—sometimes as much harm as do wicked people."

The people of Great Potamia were not often interested in the doings of Lesser Potamia, but when the rumour grew that Queen Marabout was already betrothed to King Hermann, his Majesty's subjects began to listen to gossip concerning the Queen, and to ask for news from her kingdom. The Queen-Mother was vexed and distressed at the false rumour of her son's betrothal, and caused it to be officially contradicted.

"Silly as Queen Marabout is," reflected the Cardinal as he sat down to his writing-table, "she herself would never have been foolish enough to start such a rumour as that. I warrant this man Joel is at the bottom of it—and for his own ends."

But at this time the Cardinal was much occupied. Though it wanted nearly six months to the time of the coronation, his Eminence knew that half a year was by no means too much for the thousand and one preparations which had to be made.

Among many other matters in which the Cardinal had to interest himself, the augmentation of the cathedral choir, as well as that of the chapel royal, was not the least pressing. The Dean had just been telling his Eminence that though there was no lack of singing-

men, at any rate of men who were ready and willing to put themselves in training, he did not know where to look for boys. So many of the best children of the country were at court in one capacity or other. Half jokingly the Dean suggested that the King might do what Queen Elizabeth of England had always done—send a band of men round the country to carry off any boy with a good voice they chanced to come across, no matter who he was or to what choir he already belonged. He believed that Queen Marabout herself had done something of this kind, for though her Majesty was by no means pious she was very fond of music, and the more dramatic it was the better she liked it. In fact, like Queen Elizabeth's choristers, the boys were oftener employed on the stage than in the chapel choir.

But the Cardinal had shaken his head at all this, and declared that if they could not get singing-boys by legitimate means they would contrive to do without them.

Now that his Eminence sat at his desk quietly thinking the matter out, it occurred to him that though the idea of a press-gang for such a purpose was intolerable, it might be a good thing to send one or two picked men to the provinces in order to look for promising boys whose parents were ready and willing for them to enter the King's service. In Great Potamia the career

of a singer was an honourable one, and many a boy who began by wearing a surplice subsequently wore a chasuble. Already most of the lads in the Cathedral choir, and several of the children of the chapel royal, were tonsured.

Later that same day when the Cardinal laid his schemes before the Queen-Mother it was highly approved by her Majesty, and by the King also—both of whom were greatly shocked when they heard that Queen Elizabeth and Queen Marabout were in the habit of "impressing" boys for singing and acting purposes.

A day or two later the commission set out. It consisted of the Sub-Dean of the Chapel Royal, who was in command, a canon of the cathedral and the sub-precentor, three page-boys, and three grooms from the royal stables. They were to ride from abbey to abbey, from priory to priory, and to interview the masters of all schools in their quest for choristers. If time permitted, and particularly if they were unsuccessful in their quest, they might ride on to Lesser Potamia and Bonhomy—though the Cardinal thought they would easily find the required number of boys in their own country.

But the Sub-Dean, a discreet man of mature age, held another and a secret commission, and one that he did not communicate to his fellow-travellers. He had

been charged by the Queen to make wherever he went diligent enquiries concerning the conduct of Queen Marabout, and if possible to make an incognito visit to the court of Lesser Potamia.

So many and so extraordinary were the reports concerning Queen Marabout that the King's mother found it hard to believe them, and as of course Queen Marabout would have to be invited to the coronation it was important to know if her conduct was as erratic as it was said to be.

It was a fact well known both to the King and to his mother, that several noble families of Lesser Potamia had withdrawn their boys from Queen Marabout's court, and were already settled in Great Potamia. It was said that the lads had been badly treated, and that several young pages had not only been severely flogged but, by the Queen's orders, had been kept in irons for nearly six months. However, the families of these boys had not yet been presented to King Hermann, for until after the coronation all but private audiences were now suspended.

The Queen-Mother was anxious not to prejudice her son's mind against the erratic Marabout, for though she had long ago decided to encourage him to marry early, she had never liked the idea of his being wedded to a wife several years older than himself. Still, even

this objection would not have weighed so much with her Majesty if Queen Marabout had been a wise and God-fearing woman. No one knew better than the King's mother how advantageous such a union would be—to Lesser Potamia.

So the Sub-Dean and his little retinue rode away through the January snow, and everywhere were well received and honourably entertained. For in the kingdom of Great Potamia religious houses were not few or far between: indeed the progress of the Sub-Dean would have been slow enough if he had accepted all the hospitality that was pressed upon him and his attendants.

It was late in the month of February when the travellers found themselves in that part of their country which touches upon Lesser Potamia, and as they heard that Queen Marabout was about to leave home the Sub-Dean decided that they should ride straight on to Altberg—a city that lay within easy distance of the frontier and where stood the principal royal residence.

Though he had letters from the Dean to a cousin who was one of Queen Marabout's chaplains, the Sub-Dean had no intention of putting up at the royal castle, for within a mile of it there was a Benedictine abbey with

a large and famous school for young laymen, as well as for clerics.

It has been said that three pages were in the suite of the Sub-Dean. Now the eldest of the three, a lad of fifteen, was noted for his skill in playing upon the lute, as well as for his singing, and it was at the Queen-Mother's suggestion that Boniface, as he was called, joined the roving commission. He was the son of a knight who had fallen in battle, and his mother had long been dead. Though a great favourite at court and much liked by the King, Boniface was a singularly quiet and modest lad, never so happy as when he was reading or singing or playing his lute. To the cheerfulness of the journey he had contributed much, and many a Religious community declared that by the music he was wont to give them at recreation time he amply repaid their hospitality. The Sub-Dean was not a little thankful that Boniface was of the party, for he was a pious and a prudent lad and one that could be trusted.

Not greatly caring to call at the castle himself, on the morning after their arrival the Sub-Dean gave the Dean's letter to Boniface, telling him to take his lute and to stroll up to the castle, where he would be sure to find many young pages like himself, and to hand in the letters to the Dean's cousin.

"Probably they will ask you to dinner," added the Sub-Dean, "if they do you may accept. The Queen leaves this very morning, the Prior tells me. If you dine with the pages you will be sure to hear some interesting news, and as you are not a chatterbox you will probably let them do most of the talking."

CHAPTER VIII

PAGE AND MINSTREL

Though Joel the silversmith was now attached to Queen Marabout's court as Master of the Mint, he had no intention of remaining in that capacity. For, to his utter disgust, he found there was nothing to mint; that the royal exchequer was as low as it could be; that the Queen's debts were enormous; and that her Majesty's ministers were desperate. Moreover, one of the Queen's creditors was Joel himself.

But he was a rich man, and for certain high stakes he was prepared to play a waiting game. He did not intend to live and die a mere worker in metal, however precious. Already he had the ear of the Queen, and by dint of much outrageous flattery, combined with loans of money, he had succeeded in gaining her personal regard. As a matter of fact, though she did not realise it, her Majesty was very much in Joel's power.

What her Majesty's ministers thought of all this may be imagined. Nothing but a real love for their poor little country prevented a wholesale resignation of its rulers. Already Joel was the best-hated man in Lesser Potamia. From the Prime-Minister down to the

youngest horse-boy, every person at or about the court loathed Joel.

Certainly, he told himself, he had made a great mistake in coming to Lesser Potamia, but it was a mistake he intended to make somebody pay for. Indeed, after a time he was inclined to regard it as a lucky error. In Great Potamia, of which for reasons of his own he was rather shy, he might not have been able to serve royalty in any capacity. King Hermann's goldsmith was a renowned man and a great artist, and certain business transactions Joel had had with him were not likely to be forgotten in Great Potamia.

Above all things Joel desired the marriage of Queen Marabout with King Hermann. Nothing less than this could save her Majesty's bankruptcy. Little else was talked of by her ladies and pages, and though she herself had never spoken of the betrothal, she let it be known that between her and the King there was a perfect, if quite secret, understanding. There was a slight foundation for this, but it was a very slight one. As I have said, they had met when he was a little child of seven and she a girl of ten.

"Wouldn't it be nice if we married some day?" she had said to him; "because I shall be a queen and you, Hermann, will be a king. And a king ought to marry a queen, oughtn't he?"

The little boy had nodded his head. The question did not interest him much, but he may have thought that if he must marry some day he might just as well marry this girl—who, *for* a girl, could throw a ball rather high. This is the whole account of the secret understanding between Marabout and Hermann—promptly forgotten by the latter until it was revived in his mind by one of the ministers of state.

Even now the question bored his Majesty. He led a very active and a very busy life, working hard at various languages, hunting whenever it was possible to do so, and neglecting no sort of exercise that made for skill in war or sport. For the rest, he was devoted to his mother, and could not imagine life without her love and care and companionship.

In those times news travelled slowly, and though the Queen-Mother had taken care Great Potamia should know that the report of the King's betrothal was premature, the folk of Lesser Potamia knew nothing of this and went on discussing the marriage as though the event were as certain as the coronation. They thought that in the course of her many travels Queen Marabout had gone to the court of Great Potamia, incognito, and that everything had been arranged. Of course the actual marriage could not take place for a year or two; still a formal betrothal was a very important matter,

and quite a sufficient event to keep the court and the populace of Lesser Potamia in a good-tempered mood of expectancy.

Considering that Joel had been at court scarcely two months he had not done so badly. Already he had a mortgage on most of the Queen's private property; already she had promised to knight him on her return home if, during the time she was away, he succeeded in doing what he had promised to do for the increase of the currency. For too many years paper money had almost entirely taken the place of gold and silver, though copper was plentiful enough. Now some old gold and silver-plate which the Queen thought out of fashion, but which Joel knew to be priceless, was to be melted down by him and turned into broad gold pieces and thick silver dollars.

Cunningly enough Joel had suggested that the metal was really too pure for the purpose and that it might well be eked out with gold and silver of an inferior quality. With such a suggestion the Queen was so enchanted that if she had not been very busy preparing for her departure she would have knighted Joel that very day.

"That goldsmith is a perfect old dear," she said to one of her ladies. "By the time we get back we shall just be rolling in money."

"What is the use of having lovely furs and sables and things if you don't put them on and show them to people who can't afford to buy them?" the Queen had said. "Pack up at once and let us cross the Milky Sea and get to a gayer country than Lesser Potamia. We take with us Lady Mauve and Lady Cerise. The page will be Master Scarlet."

So they started, and as the royal carriage bowled down the hill from the castle and turned the corner of the lane, the pages lingering at the gates seemed to lose their reason, so delighted were they at the departure of their royal mistress. And if the Chamberlain, and the Secretary of State, and the Master of the Pages, and all the other functionaries did not caper and shout, they were not less delighted in their hearts.

"Poor Scarlet!" one after another ejaculated, "poor—old—chap! What a time he'll have! *And* the ladies! O poor things!"

"Why do you say 'poor things'?"

The pages looked round in astonishment, for though the voice was clear and pleasant the speaker was a perfect stranger to the group of pages that stood on the drawbridge of the castle. Fresh and clear too was the questioner's face, though his cloak and hood were of coarse material and his feet were encased in wooden shoes. Boniface had left his best clothes at the abbey.

"What's it got to do with you?" enquired the page Green, looking hard at the boy-stranger.

"Hello! who's the yokel?" asked Purple, turning on his heel. "What does he want?"

"Looks like a troubadour's apprentice, doesn't he?" remarked the Yellow page, examining the lad from head to foot.

"Yes, I bet he's a minstrel," said Crimson, who was a good-natured fellow, and had a face as red as his costume. "I say, sirrah, can you tip us a tune?"

"With pleasure, sir," answered the young minstrel, drawing a lute from beneath the folds of his cloak.

"Oh, but don't let us stand shivering here," cried Blue; "the seneschal will pass him in all right, and we're sure to get a holiday to-day."

"Come on, young troubadour," shouted the laughing Crimson, "come and warm your toes and fingers at our fire."

Merrier now than ever, the pages led the newcomer through the barbicon past the guardroom, and across the first courtyard to a chamber on the ground-floor of the northeastern tower.

"You're just the kind of chap we wanted to see," exclaimed Crimson, stirring up the big blazing logs on the hearth with a broken spear. "But, I say, have you had any breakfast?"

"I thank you, sir," answered the young stranger with a courtesy that made the boys look at him curiously, "but I have breakfasted very well."

"Sure you won't have a cup of mulled wine?" asked Purple.

"Nothing, I thank you," was the reply as the speaker threw back his cloak and hood and showed that his doublet and hose were of thick leather. In another moment the lute was tinkling prettily enough. The gaily-clad group of pages were listening open-mouthed.

Bright and beautiful they loom,
Plum and peach and cherry bloom:
Bird-plumes brighter far of hue
Than ever fruit your garden grew.

Sweet the cherry ripe and red,
And the berry in its bed:
Never so divinely sweet
As the hymns our birds repeat.

Fair the shining golden grain
As sunlight o'er the eastern main:
Never yet was grain more fair
Than God's poets of the air.

"Well, now," laughed young Crimson, "that's short enough and sweet enough. But I say, young man, it's a jolly good thing the Queen's out of hearing."

The band of pages laughed prodigiously.

"Yes, sirrah," said Purple. "If ever you sing in her Majesty's presence don't you select that little ditty."

"And why not, sir?" enquired the minstrel with a smile.

"Why," put in Yellow, "because you'd find yourself hanging by your wrists, or perhaps your heels, from that little cross-beam outside there."

"But it's a song that all ladies love!" exclaimed the singer.

"That may be; but there is a particular reason why it should not be sung in Lesser Potamia," explained Green.

"However," put in Blue, "her Majesty won't be back in Lesser Potamia for months, so we needn't talk about that."

"Give us a nice long ballad, Master Minstrel," said Crimson, "something, you know, with a tail to it, or a tale in it."

"Yes," shouted several boys, "a ballad with a tale in it."

"You shall have one, gentleman," said the singer, removing his wooden shoes, while the good-natured Crimson placed a heap of fresh straw under the stranger's leather-stockinged feet. Then he began to sing:

Vander Veren, a Flemish lord
Of power and wealth, nay more—of taste,
Could fitly and right well afford,
With never a risk of prodigal waste,
To invite an Emperor to his board.

"My liege loves sights that are fair," he said,
"My pensioners many I'll all array
In richest damask."—So all who fed
At his table received, on a certain day,
So many ells of damask per head.

There were poets and painters within those walls,
Philosophers, chemists, and linguists too;
Genius lolled in the lordly halls,
And Mabuse was the chief of the artist crew,
A painter of might, and—a leader of brawls.

A leader of brawls and a lover of wine,
A spendthrift lacking of coin and sense,
Who, to the tailor with measuring line
Cried—"Leave me the damask, and get you hence!
No tailor my costume shall design."

Then the painter took the fabric fair,
Sold it for wine and drank the same;
Then—for he needs his part must bear
In the grand cortège when the Emperor came—
He did what talent alone could dare.

Sheets of paper he took and made—
  And *painted,* a beauteous damask robe;
Quoth he, "The colour 'll not soon fade,
  But I trust no fool with his foot will probe
Its hem, in the crush of the cavalcade!"

Charles the Fifth, good-humoured and fat,
  Delightedly stood the train to view;
Anon at the banquet his Greatness sat
  And, anon, Mabuse to the table drew
To offer the choice of this or that.

(Unmeet, you say, for a Child of Art
  To be at the beck of host or guest?—
Unmeet enough; yet if at the mart
  The art be sold—well the buyer's 'hest
Must needs be done on the seller's part.)

Mabuse bore trencher, flagon and flask,
  Serving awhile on bended knee
Whatever majesty deigned to ask:
  But when the Emperor fain would see,
And *touch,* what he deemed the tailor's task—

Why the artist shook in his silken shoes:
  "Alack, and alack, I am all undone!
To see through the robe—as well as the *ruse*—
  Is easy as anything under the sun,"—
Thought to himself the rogue Mabuse.

To the Emperor's host, in the interim,
An envious tongue had told the trick;
And now as the tale an ear of him
The royal guest of a day did prick,—
The trickster shook in every limb.

But a smile spread over the royal face,
As the artist made his meek replies
To questions asked with a kingly grace,
And laughter lighted imperial eyes
As Mabuse returned to his serving place.

And Vander Veren forgot the blot
On the fame of an artist of such repute,
Forgave this fondness for the pot
For sake of the wit of the painted suit;—
Alas, that the wit should sink to the sot!

Time came when from the law to flee
This brawling artist vainly tried;
And never again do we find him free,
For, painting in prison, the painter died
In fifteen hundred and thirty-three.

When Boniface had finished, the pages showed their approval in various expressive ways.

"That's the sort of ballad I like," said Crimson. "A chap like that Mabuse is sure to come to a bad end."

"He was a good painter, though," remarked Yellow.

"The Queen has got one of his pictures hanging in her with-drawing-room."

"Reminds me of that old skulk, Joel," suggested Purple.

The chorus protested.

"Not a bit of it," said Crimson. "Mabuse was just a weak silly tippler. Joel is—well, *you* know."

"Yes, *we* know," answered the chorus.

"I don't think he's a man at all," declared Master Blue. "Isn't there some story of a knave who got taken into some castle as a servant, and he turned out not to be a man at all?"

"What was he?" enquired two or three, while one small boy said, "Perhaps he was a woman?"

"No, he wasn't. Nor was he an angel: at any rate, not of the right sort."

"You don't mean to say he was a *devil?*" asked Yellow.

"Course he was, but I forget how they found it out. Doesn't somebody remember the story? Master Minstrel, do you know the tale?"

"Yes, I know it. In fact I have a little ballad on it if I can only call it to mind."

"Hurrah!" shouted several boys, while Crimson added, "Bravo! You're the fellow for us: a troubadour of the right sort."

Boniface was fingering his lute and playing a strange weird melody which, Yellow declared in a loud whisper, made him feel quite creepy.

"It is called 'The Knight's Ave,'" said Boniface, speaking as he played. Then he began to sing:

In castle-walls a robber-knight
Held men-at-arms to thieve and fight:
For rapine and dark crimes of blood
Dreaded by all that neighbourhood.

Came by that place upon a day
A holy priest in habit grey,
And as he neared the castle grim
A robber-groom rushed out on him.

"Take all I bear," the pilgrim said,
"'Tis but a loaf of barley-bread;
But bring me quickly to your lord:
For his soul's weal I'd speak a word."

The caitiff led the stranger in
Where sat at board the Knight of Sin:
"Sir Knight," the pilgrim said, "I bear
A secret it behoves you hear.

"But first call in your robber-band
And let them all in order stand."
Summoned was every man and boy
In that bad master's base employ.

"All are not here," the pilgrim cried,
As one by one on every side
He scanned them—even to the least:
"One man is missing," urged the priest.

"I know who 'tis," spoke up a page,
A saucy lad of tender age;
"The chamberlain ran off to bed,
Hoping to hide his ugly head."

Forthwith was bidden to appear
The varlet every page did fear;
Soon stood within the castle hall
A wretch whose features did appal.

Stern spoke the priest: "I thee conjure
By Christ and His own Mother pure,
Tell us who art thou, and from whence?
Why art thou here? and then—go hence!"

Trembling, the chamberlain replied:
"Alas! myself I may not hide!
No man am I, but—must I tell?—
I am a devil sent from hell!

"My master, Satan, bade me come
To watch yon Knight within his home
To 'wait the coming of a day
When *Ave* he'd no longer say.

"Then with my hands on throat and neck
To strangle him, his soul to wreck,
And bear him to his doom most fit
Deep down into the fiery pit.

"But woe is me! for day by day
Hail Mary doth he ever say,
And I am powerless 'gainst the charms
Of her who held God in her arms."

The pilgrim answered, "Wicked sprite!
Back to thy home in lasting night!
Hence, and for ever, to thy place!
This soul through Mary hath found grace."

The Knight in contrite tears did melt,
As prostrate 'fore the priest he knelt;
Fell on the band a wondrous awe,
Gladsome the sight the angels saw.

As Boniface ceased singing several of the pages crossed themselves. Most of them were too awed to say anything.

"That's Joel all over," at length whispered Purple to Yellow.

Yellow nodded.

"Well, if that chamberlain was a devil I am sure Joel's one!" exclaimed Green.

"Glad he's not our chamberlain," laughed Crimson.

"And that reminds me to go and ask for the chaplain you want to see. You have letters for him, I think you said?"

Boniface now had the letters in his hand.

"If his Reverence is busy perhaps you would hand them to him?" suggested Boniface. He felt that Crimson was a boy to be trusted.

"Yes, of course," said Crimson, taking the letters and leaving the tower at a rush—at such a rush indeed that he ran plump into the arms of a man who was just outside the door, and who might or might not have been listening to the ballad of the Knight's Ave.

The man was Joel the silversmith.

"Gently, Master Crimson," began Joel with a leer, as he dexterously snatched the letters from the lad's hand. "You have despatches for me, I notice."

"They are not for you," shouted Crimson hotly, "they are for Father Jerome."

Suddenly a trumpet pealed through the courtyard. It was the signal for dinner. Joel threw the packet back to the boy just as the pages rushed, a noisy and disorderly band, into the quadrangle, on their way to the great dining-hall.

CHAPTER IX

MERCHANTS AT COURT

THREE days later the Sub-Dean and his retinue left Lesser Potamia and the abbey in which they had been so hospitably entertained. They had intended to journey home by a different route, but so successful had they been in their quest for singing-boys, particularly at the big cloister-school they had just left, that they determined to take the way by which they had come.

The Sub-Dean and his companions had good reason to be pleased with the results of their travels. Besides having obtained a larger number of choristers than they had hoped for, they had heard a great deal about Queen Marabout and Lesser Potamia, much more indeed than they could remember, but much also that it was of the greatest importance their royal Master and Mistress should know.

Far from being a friend to Religious Orders, Queen Marabout subjected them to many and frequent annoyances and persecutions, taxing them to the utmost of their resources, and doing all in her power to curtail the privileges bestowed upon them by her ancestors.

Indeed it was known that, but for fear of her long-suffering subjects, she would long ago have suppressed all monasteries and convents in order to confiscate their property. But she feared the people, and with reason.

To the abbey which lay so close to her principal residence she was in the habit of paying regular visits, and though the Abbot would never permit her to come into the cloister, she demanded that all the boys of the school should be paraded before her from time to time, in order that she might pick and choose the most promising for her household. The consequence of this was that boys of good family were now sent to the abbey schools of Great Potamia or Bonhomy, and only orphan or friendless children were to be found in the cloister schools of Lesser Potamia. Some of these were of good birth and were, of course, anything but disinclined to exchange their school for a castle.

But as Boniface, the King's page, knew well, there were not many of Queen Marabout's boys who would not, very willingly indeed, have exchanged back again.

"You get more punishment here in a week than the monks would give you in a year," Master Crimson had told Boniface; for during the three days the Sub-Dean's party spent in Lesser Potamia, Boniface had passed much time at the castle.

"If she wasn't away so often none of us could stand it; in fact we should all run away. Then the Master of the Pages is a very decent sort, and the Lord Chamberlain is downright good to us. But they are always threatening to resign. They don't let us get half the floggings and imprisonments and tortures the Queen orders us; yet in spite of that we do get an awful lot of punishment, because they can't always hinder it. For she comes round sometimes to see if her orders have been carried out, and if they haven't we get a double dose. Why only last week just because I forgot to stand in my right place near the throne she ordered me to be hung up by the wrists for an hour; but when the warder was locking the irons on me he noticed I'd got a big sore on my right wrist, and he said I oughtn't to be hung up. So he told me just to keep out of the way for an hour. But the Queen happened to pass through the inner courtyard, and when she didn't see me hanging from the cross-beam there she sent for the warder—who told her I'd got a bad hand. 'Very well, then,' she said, 'hang him up by the ankles.' "

"But he didn't do it, surely?" asked the sympathetic Boniface.

"Oh, but he had to. She waited while they fetched me, and then she stood watching while they put the

irons on my heels and hauled me up. It's a most awful torture that; you've no idea how bad it is—though perhaps you've had it yourself?"

"Oh, *no*," replied Boniface, smiling gravely, "we have nothing of that sort in Great Potamia. Besides, we never get punished just for making mistakes, only for really naughty things. If a page takes too much wine, for instance, or is very quarrelsome and uses his dagger, or does anything that is really wicked, then he may get a whipping, or be put in the stocks for an hour or two, or be made to go about the castle in shackles for a day or so; but the King won't allow anything like torture. Why, even the wooden horse is never used—except to shy stones at."

"What lucky fellows you are!" exclaimed Crimson. "Why, when the Queen's at home our wooden horse has always got a boy on its back, with his hands tied behind him and a heavy weight hanging from each foot. And though we have got four or five pairs of stocks, when she's here they are always full of lads. It makes you wish you were back at the abbey again, I can tell you. Of course we're always losing boys; those who are noble, and who have fathers and mothers living, seldom stay very long. I was quite little when I came here—my father and mother are dead—and then all the boys were noble, but there's not one of them left.

A lot of new fellows came from the abbey last Christmas, but they are all orphans. And don't they just wish they were back again! They thought it would be so nice to wear silk and velvet instead of a leather jerkin and wooden shoes, but they don't think so now."

Of course it was impossible for the Sub-Dean to leave Lesser Potamia with fourteen boys added to his retinue without the fact becoming known in the neighbourhood and at the royal castle. Joel was one of the first to hear of it and to comment upon it. But he had too much respect for the powerful and wealthy King of Great Potamia to call in question what in his own mind he thought a somewhat high-handed proceeding. It never occurred to him that the boys were all volunteers, and that the King's commissioners were not going about the world as a press-gang, forcing children to accompany them.

A very cheery, merry party it was that rode—now through the country lanes and lonely forests and open heaths, now through the narrow streets of some quaint old city, halting at some abbey or priory for the night. Wherever they went they were heartily welcomed, though not everywhere did they get that of which they were in search. Naturally enough, the monks were not anxious to lose their best scholars, or those who had

a clear vocation to the religious life, and it sometimes happened that these were the boys who had the best voices and the most practical knowledge of music. Still, the Sub-Dean was returning home with nearly thirty promising lads, some of whom he was to take up on his way back to the court.

On the last day of his journey home he was to call at a Benedictine abbey which stood on the edge of a forest some twenty miles from the King's chief residence. It was the first Religious house the questers had called at on leaving home, and at its cloister school were two boys with such a remarkable history that, after it was told to him by the Abbot, the Sub-Dean asked for time to consider whether he would accept the lads or not.

"They are both very good boys," the Abbot had said: "indeed I question if we have two better children in our school. But it is right you should know that both of them have lain in prison under sentence of death for theft, and that they were set at liberty by the people of Bonhomy who strongly believed in their innocence. They were sent on to us from one of our houses in the kingdom of Bonhomy, an abbey which has the old privilege of sanctuary; and it is certain that since we received them their conduct has been in every way edifying and good. Moreover, I may say that I have

heard all the particulars of their case, and that I am as strongly convinced of their innocence as were the people of Bonhomy who released them from prison. Yet it is for your Reverence to decide whether you care to admit two such boys among the children of your choir. Both have pleasant voices, and, though their present knowledge of music is not great, both are intelligent enough to profit by further instruction."

The two lads were, of course, Joel's young apprentices, and what the Sub-Dean and his companions had heard of Joel in Lesser Potamia did not tend to prejudice them in his favour. In short, after talking the matter over the Sub-Dean decided to take the boys to court, and to keep them under his own observation among the children of the choir of the chapel royal.

Returning as they did in the month of March, they found the preparations for the coronation proceeding apace. That year Pentecost fell somewhat early in June, and in no department was there too much time for everything that had to be done. Already had the King's messengers been despatched to the various European courts with letters of invitation to royal personages.

Meanwhile the Sub-Dean had much to report to the Queen-Mother concerning Queen Marabout and the court of Lesser Potamia.

"This confirms but too well all the rumours that have reached me," said her Majesty when she had heard all. "Such a woman can never be the wife of my son. I am almost sorry that an invitation to the coronation has been sent to her, but that cannot now be helped. It is so sad that she should be in the hands of that unscrupulous goldsmith. I trust she will not bring him here in her train."

Of his page Boniface, the King, knowing that the boy had been at the court of Lesser Potamia, asked many questions, all of which Boniface answered truthfully enough. Indeed, seeing the King's face grow dark as he listened to the cruelties that were practised by Queen Marabout, Boniface ventured to ask his Majesty if nothing could be done to prevent them, and if, supposing the boys at the court of Lesser Potamia found their position intolerable, they could be received at Great Potamia.

The King smiled rather sadly as he pointed out to his good page how hazardous it was for one sovereign to interfere with the conduct of another.

"It would be very indiscreet to encourage anything that had the appearance of a revolt among her Majesty's servants, because that might extend to the nation and be the beginning of much serious political trouble. But we promise you, Boniface, that if any of

your friends at the court of Lesser Potamia are compelled to throw themselves on our protection, we will do all in our power to shield and to help them."

That same week the King's Chamberlain was informed that two merchants had arrived at the castle with some very curious and valuable wares which they would like to exhibit to his lordship, hoping that he would bring them under the notice of his Majesty. The Lord Chamberlain gave them audience and found that they had some old gold plate of striking design, antiquated in form but of great beauty.

One of the two men looked aged, the other was comparatively young. They said that they were French gold-merchants, and that as they had heard of the coming coronation they had decided to give King Hermann the first offer of what they knew to be very rare. It had been the property of a royal personage, they added, but one whose name they were not at liberty to mention.

The two merchants bore many credential letters, but as they looked like men of substance and were well attended, the Chamberlain did not trouble to examine their papers. The golden dishes and cups and flagons pleased him, and he strongly recommended the King

to buy them. His Majesty referred the matter to his mother.

Her Majesty was struck with the quaint beauty of the plate, but thought the price asked for it much too high. Very respectfully the merchants assured the Queen that it was a price they could easily get from several European potentates, but that out of their regard for King Hermann they had taken a long journey in order to give his Majesty the opportunity of seeing their unique wares. This saying pleased the Queen-Mother, and she at once resolved to buy the plate as a coronation gift for her son.

It was sunset before the business was concluded, and the Queen gave orders that the two merchants and their attendants should be lodged in the castle for the night. On the following morning both men attended the household Mass—though it might have been noticed that neither of them took holy water, or made the Sign of the Cross, or bent a knee in prayer. The old man kept his eyes fixed upon a certain place in the lower choir-stalls.

As the children of the choir returned to their quarters after Mass one boy said to his companion:

"I say, Fritz, did you notice that queer-looking old man in the chapel this morning—the one with a very long beard?"

"Do you mean the old man who was staring at some of us so hard?" asked Fritz.

"Yes; I didn't like the look of him," said Hans: "do you know, he reminded me of—" the boy paused and looked round.

"Of Joel?" put in Fritz. "Yet it couldn't have been Joel, could it? Joel isn't very young of course, but this man looked frightfully old. Besides, his beard was three times longer than Joel's."

"Yes, but——"

"You don't think it was a false beard, do you?"

"Might have been," said Hans.

"But why should he want to disguise himself here? They say he came to sell something to the King."

"Yes, well it may not have been Joel. We heard, you know, that he had gone to Lesser Potamia."

"Please God we may never see him again!" exclaimed Fritz.

"But he couldn't do anything to us now, you know."

"He'd try, though."

"Yes, I suppose he would. But then he'd have our King to deal with, don't you see."

"That's true. *Deo Gratias!*"

The boys crossed themselves devoutly.

CHAPTER X

THE CORONATION

MAGUS, the uncle of Queen Marabout's jester, was a philosopher of the true sort. And by this I do not mean that he was learned in philosophy—with some branches of it he was particularly well acquainted—or that he had ever sat in the professor's chair. By a philosopher of the true sort I mean a man who was really wise, as well as learned, and one who looked upon the world with complete indifference—unless he saw that he could by any effort on his part make that same world wiser and better.

It has already been said that Queen Marabout's ministers ran to him in all their difficulties, and that he had frequently rendered them important services. Yet to all their many and urgent entreaties that he would come to live at court, he steadily refused to listen. He valued his time, he valued his independence, a great deal too much ever to become a mere court functionary; above all things he valued the integrity of his conscience. Magus was indeed something better than a philosopher of the right sort; he was a devout Catholic.

But he was a student of chemistry and he had a sound knowledge of metallurgy. When therefore the new coinage of Lesser Potamia began to circulate, he soon discovered that the gold pieces were not only light in weight, but that they contained a very small admixture of the precious metal. To look at them they were pretty enough. The new die made by Joel was a work of art. The new profile of the Queen was a thing of beauty—an outrageously flattering portrait of her Majesty, of course. Moreover, the coins were all new and bright and shining, and most of the people of Lesser Potamia were glad to receive them in exchange for their old money, minted in the reign of the Queen's father. But although the old coinage was worn and dirty, its worth was nearly equal to the sum it represented.

Magus exchanged a few of the old gold and silver pieces for the brand-new ones, but only a very few, and when he had received the latter he put them away with great care. He had heard much of Joel, the new goldsmith—who had been knighted on the very day of the Queen's return, and who, it was said, now looked forward with absolute confidence to a much higher honour. I say that Magus had heard much of him—so much indeed that the good chemist now refused to set foot in the royal castle. If any of the ministers or court-func-

tionaries came to consult him he received them with respect and did all he possibly could to help them; but he would not even know the Master of the Mint.

Queen Marabout declared that she was ravished with the skill and cleverness of Sir Joel, and soon decided that such a man ought to be, and should be, a member of her Privy Council. What her Majesty esteemed most of all was money to spend in her travels, and as she was certainly going to Great Potamia for King Hermann's coronation, she wanted all the money that she could get. For though she had always said that she would never set foot in Great Potamia until its King had visited Lesser Potamia, she saw now that she must needs change her mind; this was an operation she could always perform with ease.

As the time of Pentecost drew near, the court of Lesser Potamia was almost as busy as that of King Hermann. If Marabout had been going in the character of the Queen of Sheba she could not have made more elaborate preparations. Gorgeous robes of gold and silver tissue, mantles of the costliest silks and velvets, gowns of quilted satin studded with jewels, were in the making. On this occasion she did not intend to travel incognito. She would be attended by all her ministers of state, by a guard of honour composed entirely of knights and gentlemen, by twelve ladies-in-

waiting and the same number of boy-pages in new liveries.

Even Joel's resources were severely taxed to furnish all the ready money the Queen demanded, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer was so entirely at his wits' end that he resigned his post. It was then that Sir Joel saw and seized his opportunity. If, he suggested, her Majesty cared to offer him the post, he thought that all the Queen's demands might be met. Marabout made the appointment without the smallest hesitation, and at the same time created Sir Joel a count.

And now the sometime silversmith was a personage indeed. He had attained the post he had always longed for; all that he still desired was that it should be coupled with that of Prime-Minister; then truly would he be a power in Lesser Potamia.

Count Joel was, of course, to accompany the Queen to the coronation. For his own sake and that of his country it was now his bounden duty, he told himself, to secure the union of his royal mistress with the boy-king. By every means in his power the newly-made count was pledged to further this important betrothal. For at this time nothing could be lower than the credit of Lesser Potamia, and not even the King of Bonhomy would hear of anything in the shape of a loan to a country so heavily in debt.

Queen Marabout intended to arrive in Great Potamia as early as possible, and to remain there as long as ever she could. From what she had heard, she thought it very important to see much of, and to be very gracious to the Queen-Mother. Everybody spoke of the King as a mother's boy, and as one who was apt to refer most questions to his maternal guardian. Marabout did not like this, but of course it could not be helped. She was firmly persuaded that she was very beautiful—Count Joel and her dressmakers had said so—and what she lacked in good looks she would easily make up for in splendid apparel. Moreover, she was going to give the King the pair of silver shoes once worn by Prince Olaf. Joel had sold them to her at a high price.

Enormously to her chagrin, when the Queen of Lesser Potamia arrived at King Hermann's court, she found that a palace in the city had been set aside for her accommodation, and that she would be living at least three miles from the royal castle. She could not conceal her anger, and when it was respectfully pointed out to her that her retinue was too large to be received elsewhere, and that the castle was already filled with princes and princesses who were blood-relations of the King, she declared that she would not wait for the coronation but would return home at once.

On reflection, however, Marabout again changed the little mind she possessed.

For the King hastened to pay his respects to Queen Marabout, and to explain in his own charming but perfectly straightforward way how difficult it had been to provide suitable accommodation for so many royal guests, and how much he hoped that her Majesty would find every convenience in the palace set aside for her and for her retinue. Count Joel, who was present at the interview, noticed that his Majesty expressed no regret that the Queen could not be received at the castle. Joel did not like this. Nor did he like King Hermann; the royal boy was too candid and too disingenuous for Joel's taste. Moreover, at one point in the interview the King had fixed a keen and enquiring eye upon the new Chancellor of the Exchequer.

On the whole, Joel was rather pleased that he was not living at court; for though he believed the disguise he had assumed in order to sell the plate had been perfect and impenetrable, he had felt uncomfortable under the young King's steady gaze. However, the mirror told him that if the court tailor and the court barber had not succeeded in making him appear youthful, they had removed from him many marks of age, and that he certainly did not look his years—which were not those of an old man.

The coronation itself took place in the cathedral, and as all the chroniclers of the period remark, the ceremony was noticeable for the notable prominence given to the religious and liturgical side of the great function. Even kings and queens had to give place to ecclesiastics, and were treated not so much as guests and spectators, as worshippers and assistants at a solemn service.

Boy as he was, his Majesty conducted himself throughout in a way as manly as it was devout, and it was noticed that only at the time of receiving the Blessed Sacrament did he display any emotion. But as he knelt to receive the Most Holy the tears streamed from his eyes. Another noticeable thing was that he remained kneeling in thanksgiving long after the end of the function.

A long and trying ceremony it certainly was, for his Majesty had not only to receive the homage of his nobles, but to ride through the city in procession in order to show himself to the people. Then came the great banquet at the castle, one big table being set apart for kings and queens. For three whole days there were public rejoicings throughout the kingdom, and the joy of the people was unbounded.

For three days and nights there were grand banquets

and balls at the castle; but on the fourth day the royalties began to depart. Queen Marabout stayed on.

Her Majesty was furious with everybody, but particularly with the King and his mother. Of course Marabout had been invited to, and had attended all the court banquets and balls, but the King had never once asked her to dance, had never once spoken to her —except in passing, or in courtly greeting and farewell.

By the fifth day most of the guests at the castle had departed, and it occurred to Queen Marabout that if only she continued to stay on at the palace she might possibly be invited to take up her quarters at court. But though formal calls were made by the King, always with his mother, and polite messages were exchanged every day, Queen Marabout was never asked to join the royal family circle. Yet she stayed on until the news reached her that the King was about to begin a long and leisurely journey throughout the kingdom, in order that the people might see their lately-crowned and much-loved ruler.

Then did Queen Marabout and her suite leave Great Potamia. Whether she or Count Joel was the more wrathful and implacable is a question. What cannot be disputed is that so violent became the temper of the Queen and her Chancellor of the Exchequer that long

before they reached Lesser Potamia every one of the pages had disappeared. And the horse-boys would certainly have followed their example had not Joel taken means to prevent what threatened to be a wholesale desertion. The sufferings of the poor young ladies-in-waiting may be imagined.

Joel perfectly understood that Queen Marabout's chances of marrying King Hermann were nil. The marked coldness of the King toward her Majesty of Lesser Potamia could not be misunderstood; perhaps it was even emphasised by the pains Hermann took to be polite and courteous toward his royal guest.

Then, too, Joel could not but know that upon all ministers of state accompanying their respective sovereigns the King had bestowed various orders and other favours; Count Joel had received nothing.

How heavily Queen Marabout was in debt only Joel had any idea. He himself was her creditor-in-chief. The very jewels she had worn at the coronation balls and banquets were his property. Her dress had been paid for with his money. Of course he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, but then the exchequer was an empty one.

Wretched indeed was the return journey to Lesser Potamia. Joel avoided the Queen as much as possible; the ladies-in-waiting watered the way with their tears.

Stopping at a forge on the wayside, Joel had every horse-boy's neck fitted with an iron collar and chain.

A melancholy retinue it was that reached home at nightfall—with spent horses and weary bodies, a gloomy and an ill-tempered Queen, and a master who was an adept in the use of the whip.

One week later Count Joel was appointed Prime-Minister, an office he was to hold with that of Chancellor of the Exchequer. Virtually he was now ruler of Lesser Potamia, as well as of the Queen and the court.

But Joel's ambition was not yet satisfied.

CHAPTER XI

THE LADY ELIZABETH

KING HERMANN's progress through his realm was marked with every sort of demonstration of delight on the part of the people. The journey was made in leisurely fashion, for although his Majesty was determined to see every part of his kingdom, he wished that every one of his subjects should have the opportunity of seeing their ruler, and he had determined to ride on horseback during the entire journey, spending the nights—now at some castle along the route, and now at an abbey or priory.

His Majesty's train was not a large one, and his bodyguard was made up of young noblemen of about his own age, boys who had for the most part been brought up at court, or rather at the military college which stood near, but which was quite distinct from the royal household. For, like other boy-princes famous in history, at quite an early age he had formed and commanded a regiment of boy-soldiers, sharing their instruction at the college, and permitting the best and most deserving of them to spend some weeks at court every year, and to be in attendance upon himself.

From this regiment he had selected twenty to accompany him through the territory of Great Potamia.

In addition to his bodyguard there were three chaplains, one of them being the Sub-Dean of the Chapel Royal, and eight singing-boys, together with the usual number of officials, serving-men, and grooms. Greatly to their own delight, two of the choristers were Hans and Fritz, the whilom apprentices of Count Joel.

"Is he more boy than man, or more man than boy?" was the question people asked one another, as King Hermann rode slowly through the cheering crowds of his subjects. The question was a very natural one; for while on the one hand his Majesty's face was that of a fresh and innocent-looking lad, on the other hand his bearing was so manly and dignified that if his youthful appearance had not been so pleasing it might have been entirely overlooked. His ready smile was a singularly winning one, and people did not easily forget it. His manners were those of his mother—high-bred and courteous, even a little distant but altogether kindly and simple. Children approached him fearlessly and he embraced them readily. He would always try to hinder the kneeling of any elderly person, man or woman, and would extend both his hands to raise them as they bent the knee before him. Always would he keep his right hand uncovered.

The Queen-Mother did not travel with her son, though she promised to pay him little flying visits at various stages of the journey. Wisely enough, she now wished him to act more and more upon his own initiative. Though she had ever been his counsellor and guide, she had never tied him to her apron-strings. She wanted him to regard her as his nearest and dearest, and this he willingly did; but she did not want to rule either the king or his country. Not for a moment did she wish to choose for him a spouse; though she could not help rejoicing at the thought that for several years to come she would continue to hold the first place in his heart.

Side by side mother and son had sat, studying together the map of Great Potamia, and it was she who had arranged the stopping-places in the journey, pointing out to him the castles of the old nobility at which he would be expected to remain as the guest of a night; for his Majesty had made it widely known that in no circumstances would he prolong his visits.

The enthusiasm of the people touched him deeply, and if he always maintained a smiling face as he bowed right and left, often enough the tears streamed from his eyes as old and young invoked upon him the blessing of heaven.

Only two pages accompanied his Majesty, and one

of them was Boniface, who had been his playfellow, and whom the King regarded almost as a brother.

It was on the sixth day of the journey and as they were nearing the castle of the Duke of Lixony, that the King, turning in his saddle to speak to Boniface, noticed a strange light in the boy's eyes, and a more than usually joyous expression in his face.

"Why, how now, Boniface!" exclaimed the King, "do you know the people of this place? Ah, yes, I remember: the Duke is your uncle, is he not?"

"Yes, sire," answered the smiling page, "my mother was his Grace's sister."

"Ah, I see; and you are very fond of him, are you?"

"I have not seen him since I was a little child, your Majesty, and he was very kind to me then. But what makes me so glad is that at yonder castle I shall see my sister Elizabeth."

"How delightful, Boniface? Does she live there always?"

"Yes, sire."

"Why didn't she come with the Duke to the coronation?"

"Well, your Majesty, the Duke was not quite sure if the invitation extended to my sister. Besides, she is very shy, and loves books and music more than she

loves society—if your Majesty will pardon my saying so."

"Oh, certainly," laughed the King. "You resemble her, or she resembles you, eh? But I do wish she would come to court, if only to see you, my Boniface. Why, I suppose you haven't met for several years?"

"Not for five years, your Majesty."

"What a shame! How I wish I had known that. But that's just like you, Boniface. You never ask for anything for yourself. However, I am so glad you are going to see her now."

When the King had been shown to his apartments and the pages were in attendance upon him, his Majesty suddenly turned to Boniface and said: "We must really dispense you for the time we are here. Go to your sister and—stay! would you not like to remain here for a few days? You could easily overtake us: say in three days' time."

Boniface's only reply was to kneel and kiss his Majesty's hand.

"I must see the Lady Elizabeth," the King said to himself, as some hours later he went to the ballroom. "I wonder if she's older or younger than Boniface? I forgot to ask him that."

The Lady Elizabeth was a year and a half younger than Boniface, and though her shyness scarcely per-

mitted her to look into the King's face when his Majesty had danced with the duchess and with her daughters, he sought out the young Lady Elizabeth and begged her to dance with him.

"O Boniface!" exclaimed the King as the page came a little later to thank his royal master for the honour accorded to his sister, "she is just the sweetest and shyest little maiden I ever danced with. And she is light as a feather. Her feet did not seem to touch the ground. It was like dancing with a fairy—or shall I say an angel? But she is very, very shy. 'Yes,' and 'No' were the only words she would give me."

"Sire," returned the page, "she seldom appears in society, for my aunt and uncle do not entertain much; and as I have said, she is devoted to books and to her lute."

"Oh, but she must come to court," said the King eagerly. "I must tell my mother about her. She is so very sweet and pretty and modest; I am sure my mother would like to have her among her maids-of-honour. Of course she is young, only fourteen you say; but then she is so very womanly withal. I shall write to my mother at once and send the letter by a special messenger."

When the Queen-Mother received and read her son's letter she smiled and sighed. It was so like her boy,

she thought, to tell his mother of the very first maiden he had ever admired. Even now there seemed to be something very impersonal in the matter; the King wanted his mother to know and to befriend the Lady Elizabeth. The Queen would not permit herself to think that her son was ever likely to fall in love with one who, though she was noble, was no suitable spouse for a monarch. But she immediately wrote an affectionate answer to his Majesty's letter, and promised to send the maiden an invitation, which would of course be a command, forthwith.

The Queen smiled as she thought of a very safe plan that occurred to her. Her boy would be absent from court fully three months, possibly longer; why should she not have the damsel among her maids-of-honour for that period, and then permit her to leave for home just before the King's return? Hermann quite understood that the ladies of the court were only in attendance for a limited period, and he would be so pleased that his suggestion had been immediately acted upon. The Queen herself was quite prepared to like the Lady Elizabeth, whose brother Boniface was so singularly good and lovable.

So before the week was over the young maiden was among the Queen's ladies, feeling very shy but acting by no means awkwardly, and making more than one

of her companions envious of her sweetness and her beauty.

For that the Lady Elizabeth was exceedingly beautiful could not be denied. To herself the Queen admitted that never had she seen such hair of soft gold silk, such sky-blue eyes, and such a complexion of pure red and white. Yet the most remarkable points about Elizabeth were her modesty and gentleness.

"Happily," said the Queen to herself, "Hermann will soon forget the little maid. Before he has finished his travels he will have seen all the noblest and fairest daughters of Great Potamia; indeed, I shall not be surprised if before he returns home, he asks me to invite several other young ladies to court."

Meanwhile the Queen-Mother received from the King of Bonhomy, her father, alarming news concerning the health of her young brother Olaf, the Carmelite. There was such a difference of age between them that the Queen, who was King Bonhomy's eldest child, knew little or nothing of her little brother, for he had been born after her marriage with the late King of Great Potamia. The present King had never seen his mother's little brother, and was always amused when he heard Olaf spoken of as his uncle, seeing that he (Hermann) was his senior by some months.

Yet since the incident of the silver shoes, King Her-

mann had taken a great interest in Prince Olaf, and they had exchanged several affectionate letters, in which the King earnestly recommended himself to his uncle's prayers.

During the past year many rumours of Olaf's sanctity had reached Great Potamia, and the Cardinal-Archbishop said publicly that Brother Aquinas was certainly practising heroic virtue, and that his brethren already regarded him as a saint.

Now though Prince Olaf had been an exceedingly delicate child, during the time of his novitiate his health had improved in such a marked way as to remove all cause for anxiety from the minds of his parents and superiors; latterly, however, he had been very ailing, and now seemed to be in some danger.

"Pray much for dear Olaf, my darling," wrote the Queen-Mother to her son, "and get many Masses said for him. I fear I must go to Bonhomy to be with my father and mother, for they are getting old, and my married brothers and sisters are too far off, or too much occupied with their respective families, to visit Bonhomy. You, my darling, are in good hands, and your travels are only half completed. By the time you get home I trust I shall have returned."

The Queen set off at once for Bonhomy, but long before she reached her father's house news came to her

that her young brother was dead. More than this, it was said that miracles were already being worked at his tomb. The Carmelite priory was besieged with pilgrims from every part of the country. Incredible difficulty had been experienced in burying the body, and the crowd had only been controlled by the presence of men-at-arms.

The King and Queen of Bonhomy were in great grief and gladly welcomed the arrival of their eldest daughter. Before many days had passed other members of the family reached Bonhomy—some from considerable distances, to which, however, the fame of Olaf's sanctity had already reached.

"How foolish we were," said the weeping King one day to his family circle, "how very foolish to let those silver shoes of the dear lad leave Bonhomy. Why did we not buy them back while they were in the possession of that man Joel? Who knows what has become of them by this? It is said that they were bought by that erratic Queen of Lesser Potamia, and I have already sent special messengers to her court to enquire about them, and to offer a large sum of money for them."

"But, my father!" exclaimed his eldest daughter, "the shoes are already in my son's possession; they formed part of the coronation present bestowed upon him by Queen Marabout. Dear Hermann will be only

too pleased to ask your acceptance of them, I am sure. I am sending some despatches to him to-morrow, and I will tell him how much consolation he will afford you by the present of dear Olaf's shoes."

"It will be a real consolation to us," exclaimed the King. "Strangely enough, we are the only people in Bonhomy who retain no relic of him, for before he went to the priory he begged so earnestly that he might give all his belongings either to the poor or to his friends, that we could not refuse him. The consequence is that we have not an article of his wearing apparel or of anything that he used. His poor Carmelite habit was pulled from his body by the pious crowd: indeed it was replaced several times, only to be torn off by the devout."

A few days after this the King's messengers to the court of Queen Marabout returned. To the astonishment and bewilderment of the King and Queen of Bonhomy and to their eldest daughter, they were the bearers of Olaf's silver shoes.

"But, my daughter!" exclaimed the King, "you told us that the silver shoes had been given to your son?"

Hermann's mother could only say that Queen Marabout assured them that the shoes she presented at the coronation were the veritable pair once worn by Prince Olaf. The young King had accepted them with pleasure,

and always kept them in the little private oratory near his bedchamber. "Even then," added the Queen-Mother, "my son regarded them as a sort of relic, for he believed that his little uncle had had them made as instruments of penance, and not out of mere caprice."

"It is likely!" said the King; "it is quite likely. We never understood our darling till we lost him. But in regard to the shoon, there is certainly some mystery. How shall we ever find out which is the genuine pair?"

"Certainly these do not appear to have been worn," remarked the Queen of Bonhomy, as she examined them closely. "And when they were sold by the Prior, I remember hearing that certain marks upon them—a dint, I think it was—detracted from their market value."

"Ah!" exclaimed the King.

CHAPTER XII

AT THE COURT OF BONHOMY

KING HERMANN'S mother lost no time in sending trusty messengers to her court for the silver shoes presented to her son by Queen Marabout. Hermann had already written to say that, though he valued such a relic very highly, he was only too pleased to sacrifice it for the solace of his grandfather and grandmother.

Strange to say, when the second pair of shoes arrived from Great Potamia they exactly resembled those already bought by the King of Bonhomy from Queen Marabout at an exceedingly high price. There was no dint upon them, no scratch or mark or sign of wear upon either of them. It was certain that both pairs could not be genuine; it seemed likely that neither pair had ever been worn by Prince Olaf.

The Carmelite Prior was sent for and gave it as his opinion that the shoes shown to him were spurious. He remembered every detail of the pair the Prince had left at the crib, because Joel had been careful to point out to him whatever scratches or dints were upon them; for though Olaf had worn them only from Christmas

Eve to the morning of St. Stephen's day he had during that time run about in them a good deal, indoors and out-of-doors, with all the recklessness of a boy of twelve. Of course the silversmith's art might have removed these marks, added the Prior, but there was such a look of brand-newness about each of the two pairs before him that he greatly doubted their genuineness.

All sorts of strange rumours had reached Bonhomy from Lesser Potamia—rumours concerning Queen Marabout, the new Prime-Minister, and the new coinage.

"There can be no doubt," the King was saying to the Prior, "that things in that country are in a very bad way. Two people from Lesser Potamia arrived here last night, an uncle and a nephew—the latter to throw himself upon our protection, the former to beg us to intervene in the affairs of his country. The boy has been a jester at Queen Marabout's court, but has run away on account of the ill-treatment he received at the hands of the Queen and of Joel. His uncle bears excellent credential letters from the ex-ministers of the Queen, the men whose places Joel has taken. He is also strongly recommended to our notice by the Lord Abbot and the court chaplains. We have not yet interviewed him or his nephew, but we find the man's cre-

dentials very satisfactory. We suppose, Father Prior, you have no knowledge of such a person?"

"Your Majesty," answered the Prior, "if as I suspect, this man is generally known in Lesser Potamia as Magus, I can only say that I have heard him spoken of as the wisest man in that realm, and one of the holiest to be found outside the walls of a Religious house. As your Majesty knows, we have had many pilgrims at the priory during the last month, and among them were a few from Lesser Potamia. With them I had speech, and they all spoke in praise of Magus—who, they said, was hated and feared by Joel. Indeed Magus would have joined the pilgrimage, they said, if he could have obtained the release of his nephew, who seems to have been imprisoned in the castle dungeon for many long months. Evidently he has succeeded in delivering the poor lad and they have left the country secretly."

"We will interview them both in your Reverence's presence," said the King, giving orders that Magus and his nephew should have immediate audience.

Nothing could be imagined less like the merry-andrew we met in a former chapter than this pale, sickly-looking boy who now, leaning on his uncle's arm, limped painfully into the presence chamber. When they had made their obeisance the King ordered them

to be seated. Then turning to the man his Majesty asked him a few formal questions as to his name and country, his age and profession, all of which were promptly and satisfactorily answered.

"And what is it you wish us to do for yourself and for your nephew?" asked the King.

"Sire," began Magus, "for myself I ask nothing—except leave to reside in your Majesty's dominions, and to some extent under your Majesty's protection, in order that I may pursue my studies. For my nephew I would beg a place in your Majesty's household, at least for a time—long enough to protect him from the cruelty and torture of the employer from which he has managed to escape."

"Cruelty and torture!" exclaimed the King; "these are strong words, Master Magus."

"Sire," returned Magus, "a very little examination of this poor boy's body would prove that no other words can fitly describe what he has undergone in the dungeon of Queen Marabout's castle. But I have no wish to trouble your Majesty with even the shortest account of them. I come here to plead for my unhappy country. As I have said, I was born and brought up in Lesser Potamia, and no land is so dear to me as is that over which Queen Marabout rules—nominally at least."

"What do you mean by nominally?" asked the King sharply.

"I mean sire, that the Queen rules only in name, and not in fact. The present ruler of Lesser Potamia is Count Joel, Prime-Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer."

"But what would you have us do in so delicate a matter? Do you not know that we have a constitutional dislike of interfering in any business outside our own range of duties?"

"Such a dislike is entirely creditable to your Majesty—in ordinary circumstances. But the circumstances of my country are at present quite out of the ordinary. Its actual ruler is a foreign adventurer and, if I may say so without offence, one of your Majesty's subjects. Joel is a refugee from Bonhomy. He had no permission to leave this city and kingdom; he fled because he feared the vengeance of the people. It is within your Majesty's power to recall him—if necessary, to take him by force."

The King shut his eyes, and for some time silence reigned in the audience chamber.

"In a serious matter of this sort we cannot be too cautious," said the King, rousing himself at length, and rising from his chair of state. "It is our wish," he continued, turning to a lord-in-waiting, "that Mas-

ter Magus and his nephew be honourably lodged and entertained. We will treat of these matters on a future occasion."

But just as his Majesty was preparing to leave the apartment, his eyes fell upon the two pairs of silver shoes which stood side by side on the table.

"Ah!" exclaimed the King, "we had forgotten. Have you any knowledge of metals, Master Magus?"

"Yes, your Majesty, I have."

"Well, then, we wish you to examine these articles, and to tell us, if you can, whether they have been wrought recently, and of what quality is the metal of which they are made. But what we particularly wish to know is, if from any one of the shoes a scratch or mark of any kind has been removed. And be sure you keep the two pairs separate and distinct in their respective boxes."

"Sire, I will examine them at once. Your Majesty shall receive a report upon them as soon as possible."

"Good," said the King. "Father Prior, we wish you to attend us in a private audience."

Later in the day the King sent his own leech to examine the young jester, and to do for him whatever might be beneficial.

The old doctor was appalled at the lad's condition.

There was no need to ask the sufferer how he came by the wounds and sores upon neck and ankles and wrists. It was clear that he had worn a collar of iron, and that his manacles and shackles had cut into the flesh. He admitted that for a long time his neck had been chained to his feet in such a way that he could not stand upright, and that when the iron began to make a wound upon his neck he had been forced to take a kneeling position while his hands were chained behind his back and then fastened to his ankles.

Magus declared that the lad had been stout and lusty until his imprisonment: a diet of bread and water had brought him down to such a condition of emaciation that he was scarcely recognisable.

"The Queen often punished us," said the boy, "but it was only now and then that she was really cruel. Count Joel tortures you. It was he who had me imprisoned and who told the warder how I was to be chained. And it was all because I made a little joke that he didn't like. It was only a stupid little riddle I made for fun: 'When is a silversmith a shoemaker?' And the answer was, 'When he makes silver shoon.' I don't know why he was so angry about it. If I had made a pair of silver shoes I should be very proud, particularly if I had made them for a prince."

It was on the following day that Magus returned the

two pairs of shoes to the King, and unhesitatingly gave his judgment upon them.

"Your Majesty may not have noticed that one pair is much heavier than the other," said Magus; "but the truth is that neither is made of silver. The heavier pair is of iron, the other of tin: each is plated over with a kind of inferior silver. Both pairs have been made very recently. I could easily remove the coating of silver, or partially remove it, and show your Majesty the iron and tin beneath."

"Some day we may ask you to do that," said the King. "For the present we will have the shoes put in a safe place."

A heap of coins lay on the table and the King took up what looked like a gold piece. "Do you know these?" asked his Majesty.

"Very well indeed, sire; I have a few in my possession—a very few, I am thankful to say."

"You do not think that they are of full value?"

"Far from it, sire."

"What is the value of one of these gold pieces?"

"Less than the half of what it represents, your Majesty."

"And this is the new coinage of your new Prime-Minister?"

"It is, sire."

"These, too, we will have carefully put away," said the King. "Meanwhile, we are in correspondence with our grandson, the King of Great Potamia, who is still travelling through his country. It is possible that his Majesty may extend his journey as far as Bonhomy. Of course it will be some time before we can hear from him. Meanwhile, we trust you and your nephew will remain under our protection. We have given orders that you are to be supplied with whatever books or instruments you may need. By-and-by we may have need of your services. We trust that your nephew will soon get stronger; our leech shall give him every attention."

Magus expressed his deep gratitude to the King and withdrew. Though the good man would much rather have been housed in the guest-quarters of some monastery, his gratitude for the kindness shown to the boy, as well as his great longing to get something done for his country, made him glad to remain at the court of Bonhomy.

The King of Bonhomy was very far from wishing to act on his own responsibility. That he would be slow to act at all, was certain. He was a good man but very wooden—without imagination and without initiative. His policy was generally that of a masterly inactivity. Some of his subjects spoke of him as "a plain, prac-

tical man," too cautious ever to do anything very rash. Others said that he was so afraid of making a mistake that he would never make anything at all in this world —except a little money and many enemies. Others laughed at him and called him a harmless old thing, and one who would never have an enemy because he would never possess a friend. And it was a fact that, outside his own family circle, he was intimate with none. Perhaps the Carmelite Prior now stood to him in the place of a confidant, for lately he had become his Majesty's confessor.

King Hermann's mother remained at Bonhomy for a fortnight, and then joined her son at one of the towns on the return route he was just beginning. She had many things to say, though she could only stay with him for a day. She wanted to tell him how much she esteemed the Lady Elizabeth; she wanted to hear more of his journey than he could tell her in despatches. Above all, she wished him to find out how the public opinion of Great Potamia was affected by the doings of the Queen and the Prime-Minister of Lesser Potamia. She desired to know also what his Majesty's feelings were in regard to the mismanagement of a territory that joined his own, and one that, though too small to be a menace to the peace of the larger country, could not be left out of count in his Majesty's foreign policy.

CHAPTER XIII

HIGH STAKES

JOEL was by no means content to be Prime-Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer; he would be King of Lesser Potamia in name as well as in fact. At any rate he would be King Consort—the husband of the Queen.

For seeing that there was now no sort of hope that she would ever marry the King of Great Potamia, Count Joel did not hesitate—not merely to propose to her Majesty, but to press his suit. With the greatest scorn and with angry laughter did the Queen listen, or rather refuse to listen to him. When he persisted she became hysterical and then violent, throwing at him a large and valuable vase—which he easily dodged and of which he subsequently picked up the broken pieces. Then he retired, merely remarking that he would see her Majesty when she had quite recovered. He knew that he had chosen a good time for his proposal, for the Queen, having been at home nearly four weeks, had just declared that if she did not immediately get change of air and scene she would die.

But before she could get change of air and scene she

needed change of another sort. Her purse was very low and the little money she had was of the new coinage; already she had discovered that foreign money-changers looked askance at the new coinage, and refused to give her more than a tenth of its supposed value. Therefore, she wanted money, and to get it she must apply to the man who wished to marry her, or rather, insisted upon marrying her.

Joel did not wait upon his royal mistress until she sent for him. When he appeared he had a bundle of documents in his hand, and when the Queen, without making any allusion to the scene of the previous day, requested him to furnish her with a good supply of the old good coinage, not the new, he bowed very low, smiled sardonically, and then on bended knee presented her Majesty with a detailed statement of what she already owed him.

If there had been a fire in the room probably the Queen would have thrown the papers into the middle of it, but the weather was still warm and there was no fire, so that she had to be content to throw the bundle at Joel's face. Easily and composedly he caught it and laid it on the table at her Majesty's elbow. Two or three unlucky pages giggled, and she immediately ordered them to get thirty lashes apiece. Eventually she had the apartment cleared, and informed Count

Joel that she was about to journey to Bonhomy, and that she needed five hundred old gold pieces.

With a respect which was ridiculously exaggerated, Joel replied that he would immediately place the money in her Majesty's hands if she would reply with one affirmative word to a very simple question. Would her Majesty accept his hand? His heart, he added with a grin, had long been in her Majesty's possession.

The Queen burst into passionate tears.

"You odious wretch!" she screamed. "Surely in making you a count of the realm and a Minister of State, I have done enough for you! You, a mere craftsman and shopkeeper! How dare you insult your Queen?"

"Believe me, Madame," he said, placing a hand upon his heart, "there is nothing that love dare not do. There is nothing farther from my intention than to insult your Majesty. I but offer you the affection, the devoted affection, of an honest man."

"Honest man!" she cried scornfully, "what do you know of honesty? And why do you persecute me with these papers?" she continued, accidentally catching sight of the first document, which bore upon it the sum total of her debt to Joel. Curiosity impelled her to glance at it. She turned pale, and the paper fell from

her hand. Joel picked it up and at the same time bent his knee before the Queen.

"Accept my hand, Madame, and my devoted care. Say but the one little word 'yes,' and I affix my hand and seal to this bill. The debt will be for ever wiped out."

The Queen was silent save for a stifled sob.

"You must wait until our return from Bonhomy," she said at length. "We cannot be forced into such a marriage without taking time for consideration. Give us the money for our journey, and on the word of a Queen we promise to give you your answer immediately upon our return."

Joel swept up the papers and made a profound bow.

"I regret that I cannot accept your Majesty's proposition," he said, with some firmness. "I have the honour of wishing your Majesty good morning, and a happy journey."

He had reached the door of the room when the Queen said:

"Stay! Count Joel. The marriage you desire would of course be a private and a secret one?"

"Certainly *not,* Madame," he said with decision.

"Oh, you odious wretch," wailed the Queen. "Why, there is not a priest in the land who would marry us."

"Possibly not, Madame," he snarled, "but in other

lands there are what are called ministers—as your Majesty well knows."

The Queen looked up quietly. She was very pale.

"What do you mean to insinuate?" she asked brokenly.

"Nothing, Madame, except that a little bird has told me how well affected you are toward the new religion."

"It is a lie!" she exclaimed, springing from her chair and stamping her foot. She was trembling with rage—or with fear; perhaps with both.

"Nothing can be easier than to get one of the new ministers to perform the ceremony," he laughed. "Why, there is nothing they will not do to oblige a king or queen. Martin Luther will even let a man have two wives."

"What have you heard about me?" she demanded with vehemence.

"Only that in your travels, Madame, you have made many new friends, and that among them are not a few Protestants."

"I will have those maids of mine roasted at a slow fire."

"That will not help matters in the least," he said mockingly. "I have not been gossiping with your ladies-in-waiting. My little bird was not a maid-of-honour."

"You have been tampering with my despatches!" she exclaimed.

"Am I not your Prime-Minister?" he answered with a grimace. "It is true that I have in my possession papers that would prove you to be a heretic. Moreover, Madame, those who possess a secret library should be careful to keep it locked."

The Queen sank into the nearest chair and fell a-weeping.

"I will be generous," he began after a long pause, which was punctuated by the Queen's sobs. "I perceive now that the marriage could not be a state ceremony. Let it then be a private one. You are right in saying that no priest will bless our union; personally I am glad of that. We will go beyond the frontier incognito. You will be on your travels as usual; I shall follow after an interval. No one need be the wiser—until we are actually united. Your Lutheran minister will provide the necessary witnesses—for witnesses I insist upon. You will still be Queen of Lesser Potamia and I—I shall be King-Consort."

"King of Devils!" she exclaimed passionately.

"Yes, yes!" he laughed; then drawing from his pouch a bag of money he thrust his hand into it and made the gold pieces chink. The Queen looked up suddenly.

"If I marry you," she said, "you will endow me and my country with all your worldly goods?"

"Of course, Madame," he answered, holding out his right hand.

"Then I am yours," she replied, placing her hand in his.

"Let us not delay the marriage," he urged. "Once we are united no one can interfere. You wish to travel? Good. Depart at your convenience. I will follow after."

"You are an angel!" she exclaimed as he handed her the bag of money.

"Yes," he said to himself, smiling grimly as he left the room, "I will follow after. And very close after you, Madame, I assure you. I will shadow you as if I were in truth your angel—or your familiar demon."

Joel had no intention of losing sight of the Queen for a single hour. On the following morning, though he took an affectionate leave of her Majesty, and promised to meet her at the appointed place in three days' time, she had no sooner left the castle than he and his son mounted their horses and set off—ostensibly in the opposite direction, but taking a round which would soon bring them to the road upon which the Queen was travelling.

Little has been said about the people of Lesser Potamia for the simple reason that they were peaceable and law-abiding folk, caring little for politics and much for religion, devoted to agricultural pursuits and thrifty beyond the common run of men. In time past no nation had shown greater patriotism or loyalty, and the fact that they were governed by a young queen served only to strengthen their attachment to the throne.

But now and for several years past there had been, naturally enough, much discontent and disaffection. Under such a rule as Queen Marabout's probably no nation in the world would have been so patient as her subjects had shown themselves; yet wishing and hoping for the union of their sovereign with the King of Great Potamia, they had borne much oppression and wrong. Already they were being taxed beyond endurance. The greater part of the nobility were non-resident; the people were badly represented; they had no leader.

Yet when they discovered that their coinage had not merely deteriorated, but that its actual value was of the most dubious, a great wave of indignation spread throughout the land. Secret meetings were held, and those among the ex-ministers dismissed by Joel who had not already left the country were asked to advise and to help. With the knowledge that King Hermann

would never marry their Queen, their last hope had vanished.

The pious among them were making pilgrimages to Bonhomy in order to implore for their Queen and country the intercession of the saintly young Carmelite. The impious were trying to stir up the people to deeds of violence. The few politicians in the country were determined to take instant measures for the salvation of their fatherland.

So it came to pass that while letters were passing and repassing between the King of Bonhomy and the King of Great Potamia, deputations of Lesser Potamians were sent to each of these monarchs, imploring their intervention. Each deputation was headed by an ex-minister of State. That they chose the time of departure just three days after Queen Marabout had set out, was a mere accident.

How to find the King of Great Potamia, and when they came upon his Majesty how to secure his time and attention, were the difficulties. So the deputation resolved first of all to visit the Queen-Mother, and if they received a favourable hearing from her they would beg her to give them letters of intercession to her son.

The deputy to the King of Bonhomy had no difficulties to encounter. Moreover, Magus was now at the

court of Bonhomy; what they had to say to the King would be no news to his Majesty.

Discreetly enough, each member of the two deputations left the country singly, appointing a place of meeting across the two frontiers.

Meanwhile Magus was not idle. The King of Bonhomy was already in possession of a complete history of the reign of Queen Marabout, and if he had not been one of those so-called "plain, practical business-like men" who by sheer obstinacy and stupidity manage to impress people as wooden-headed as themselves, Lesser Potamia would have benefited immediately and lastingly. But the King temporised and referred things to his eldest daughter and to King Hermann.

However, his Majesty received the deputation civilly and tried to listen to them without falling asleep. Then he made them a speech full of truisms and platitudes and conventional phrases, winding up by reminding them that patience was a virtue. Certainly in dealing with his Majesty it was a most necessary, if not an heroic virtue.

Having been entertained at the court of Bonhomy for three days, on the morning of the fourth they were about to depart for Lesser Potamia when a most unusual excitement among the members of the royal

household caused them to enquire if there was any news.

"News!" exclaimed a groom of the chamber laughing heartily, "I should just think there is. Why, man, before nightfall the young King of Great Potamia will be here."

CHAPTER XIV

THE COMING OF HERMANN

Never had such a day been known at the court of Bonhomy. Even the King was not permitted to take a nap. Every servant in the castle was working his hardest. Men-at-arms were called in to help. All was bustle and excitement and confusion.

The King did not at all like the suddenness of it. Late the night before a messenger had arrived at the castle with despatches from King Hermann. Business of great moment, wrote his Majesty, had caused him to interrupt his progress through Great Potamia, and he and his train were already travelling toward Bonhomy as fast as possible. On the evening of the third day from that upon which he wrote, he hoped to arrive. There were no explanations; there was no news.

When the report reached the city steps were at once taken to give the young and newly-crowned King a right royal welcome. All that day draperies of scarlet and blue and gold were being hung from windows and balconies. Banners floated from every roof and tower.

But it was close upon midnight when the King

arrived, weary and travel-stained, and glad to take a little refreshment ere he went to rest.

On the following morning, however, his Majesty was hearing Mass at six o'clock, and though he was told that his royal host would not appear until an hour or so before noon, by eight o'clock Hermann was at his desk, writing and dictating despatches. Three hours later the King of Bonhomy sent for him.

Grandfather and grandson had not met since the latter was a little child; to-day they were seated side by side discussing the affairs of Lesser Potamia.

"Sire," King Hermann was saying, "we must act at once. There is no time to lose. We have evidence of two deplorable facts. This very day Joel is married to Queen Marabout, and by a minister of the new religion. When they will return to Lesser Potamia we do not know. Rumours of the Queen's apostasy reached me last week, and though it came from a trustworthy source I refused to believe it. Unhappily, it is too true. The man Joel is, I am told, of no religion; directly the couple return, however, the Catholic religion is to be suppressed. The Lutherans were so delighted at the Queen's perversion that they could not keep it secret. Already some of them are flocking into Lesser Potamia, hoping to obtain offices in or about the

court. Grandsire!" exclaimed the boy-king, "there is not a moment to lose."

"But what do you propose to do?" enquired the King of Bonhomy uneasily.

"*Do*, grandsire!" exclaimed the royal lad, "I intend to protect the Catholic Faith—at the cost of my life, if necessary. I intend to go to the relief of the oppressed people of Lesser Potamia. I propose to protect that unhappy Queen from herself, and from the villain she has wedded. Listen, grandsire! I have ordered my troops to advance upon Lesser Potamia and to take possession of all the royal residences in my name. I myself shall meet them at noon to-morrow. When the Queen and Joel hear of this they will return immediately. Then I shall present each of them with an ultimatum. I do not want their country: I will not keep it, even if I have to take it and hold it for a time."

"And what do you propose to do with Joel?"

"I propose to seize him and to hand him over to your Majesty."

"But—but—why to us?"

"Because he is your Majesty's subject."

"We—we really don't want him."

"Probably nobody does," laughed Hermann, "not even the poor, silly Queen he has forced to marry him —if he has forced her."

"On the whole," said the King of Bonhomy, "we would rather not interfere. At our age we ought not to meddle in foreign politics."

"Not when the Faith of an entire country is in danger, grandsire!" exclaimed the boy-king with flashing eyes.

The old King shuffled his feet and closed his eyes as he said:

"My boy, you are—well, very young, and impetuous, and—all that."

"Grandsire," began the boy—tears now stood in his eyes—"I am all that you say, but I am more than you say. My youth I cannot help. I am not yet fully sixteen years old. Nevertheless—and I entreat your Majesty to forgive my presumption—I intend to do what I have said. I am the crowned King of Great Potamia, and I have promised the good God to defend what I know to be—the Right. Already I have submitted my plans to my mother, to my guardian the Cardinal-Archbishop, and to my ministers. Each and all approve."

"Well, well," muttered the King of Bonhomy as he rose from his chair, "by all means follow the dictates of your conscience. But don't drag *us* into the matter. We have no taste for international complications. We will see you later concerning this and other matters."

King Hermann opened the door for his grandfather, bowed, and returned to his writing-table; but before he sat down he stamped his foot thrice.

His page Boniface appeared in the doorway.

"Boniface," said the King, "I am going to the shrine of my sainted uncle at the Carmelite priory. Will you accompany me?"

"Very willingly, your Majesty," said the page.

"Let us go together, and on foot. I want to commend our cause to the Blessed Olaf. By and by, perhaps, we will ride through the city in state. Just now I want to pray. Pray with me and for me, Boniface."

A few minutes later the two boys passed out of the castle and down the hill to the Carmelite priory. They did not know it, but they were followed by Magus and his nephew—who also went to the shrine. They and they only recognised the King of Great Potamia. In a few minutes they were all kneeling at the tomb of Olaf of the Silver Shoes.

But as the King and his page left the church, Magus and his nephew knelt and kissed Hermann's hand.

"I only went to assure your Majesty that I am your devoted servant," whispered Magus. "Command me in any way you will. I am from Lesser Potamia, and what I do not know about the residence of the Queen

my nephew here can supply. I came to Bonhomy to give information to your royal grandsire and to implore his help."

"Are you Magus?" whispered the King.

"I am, your Majesty."

"Then you are the man I want. You will attend me in my journey to Lesser Potamia?"

"I will indeed, sire."

"Good! This afternoon I ride through the city. To-morrow we start for Lesser Potamia."

Magus and his nephew knelt, and the King with his page passed on.

"I have made the saint a promise," said the King to Boniface when they were alone. "I have promised Prince Olaf—or shall I say Brother Aquinas?—that if I am successful in my enterprise I will institute a new order of chivalry in his honour. It shall be called the Order of the Silver Shoon, and he shall be its patron. In my dominions it shall take precedence of all other orders. Its badge shall be a silver sabot, and it shall be conferred only upon men who have practised the Seven Corporal Works of Mercy. Mere bravery in the field shall be otherwise rewarded. Even a bad man can on occasion be courageous in time of war. Physical courage is a fairly common commodity. By all means let it have its reward. It is courage of another

and of a higher order that I want to honour and to distinguish."

"That is a beautiful idea, sire," said Boniface. "But what a pity it is your Majesty is not in possession of the shoes of Prince Olaf, or even of a portion of them."

"I am thinking of asking my grandfather to give me a small portion of one of them, so that I can have it inserted in a splendid pair that I will have made as the insignia of the new order."

That afternoon King Hermann rode in state through the city, attended by his suite and the bodyguard of boy-soldiers. The people of Bonhomy received him with great enthusiasm. Every street was illuminated, and the applause of the people was thrilling.

That evening at the castle there was a grand banquet, and the young sovereign sat at the right hand of the King of Bonhomy—who toward the end of the dinner began to speak to his royal guest of Prince Olaf.

King Hermann listened with great respect, and then explained to his grandfather the details of the new order of chivalry he hoped to found. This led the old King to relate the story of the duplicate silver shoes, and the report that Magus had made upon them.

"Grandsire," said Hermann, "it is quite clear that this whilom silversmith is a villain. When I get to

Lesser Potamia I shall regard the haunts of Joel as so many places to be searched by the civil officers. It may be we shall still find the actual shoes that Olaf wore. And if, grandsire, I am fortunate enough to find them may I present your Majesty with one of them and retain the other?''

''You may indeed, Hermann,'' said the King of Bonhomy. ''And at my death I shall leave mine to the Carmelite priory.''

Before Hermann retired to rest he sent for Magus.

''Is it true,'' his Majesty enquired, ''that a deputation from Lesser Potamia was here very recently?''

''It is true, sire,'' said Magus. ''Moreover, its members are still in the city. Knowing that your Majesty was expected, though they left the castle they did not leave the town.''

''Do you know where they are lodging?''

''I do, sire.''

''At eight in the morning I should like to see them. Perhaps they are already provided with horses?''

''They are, sire.''

''In that case they may join our train.''

''They will follow your Majesty wherever you go.''

''And you, Magus, and your nephew?''

''We are your Majesty's devoted servants.''

"We will start as soon as may be. Is it possible for us to reach Lesser Potamia by sundown?"

"It is quite possible, sire, because, as your Majesty is aware, this town is not many miles from the frontier."

"I appoint you my aide-de-camp," said the King.

CHAPTER XV

DELIVERANCE

From the first year of her reign Queen Marabout had, as we have said, shown the greatest hostility to all who had tried to hinder her vagaries, or to induce her to act like a Christian sovereign. Naturally enough, the clergy held the first place in her disesteem. The very sight of a priest vexed her. In none of her peregrinations had she ever sought a confessor; rarely had she heard Mass, and as her journeyings were very frequent she had little by little given up the practice of her religion long before she lent an ear to the teaching of Luther and of his followers. In such circumstances her actual apostasy was only a matter of time.

From the beginning Joel had marked her out as one of those silly, frivolous young women who are so much esteemed by men who have things to sell, and who prove such easy dupes to those whose minds are filled with craft and who possess a certain strength of purpose. Cleverly enough Joel had laid his plans. To tempt and to dazzle a girl like Marabout with pretty stones was sufficiently simple; to place her under an obligation to himself was easy enough; to win her con-

fidence was not a hard task. Everything else, honours and dignities, titles and emoluments, followed as naturally as possible. Then he played for the high stakes of her Majesty's hand and won. But he was not content.

He was an absolutely godless man, but sundry peeps into the heretical books the Queen thought were safely concealed, convinced him that there was something in this new religion that might possibly suit his purposes. Joel was in love with Martin Luther—the reformer who chanted the praises of "wine, women, and song." His ambition was not yet satisfied. Lesser Potamia, of which he would be the actual ruler, was a small country. What if, while imposing a new religion upon it, he could make it larger? What if he could make himself a sort of Protestant Pope? Had not Henry of England done this? Was not the reigning Queen of that country a Protestant? Did not Protestantism make for commercial success? After his marriage why should he not try to come to an understanding with the new teachers who lived beyond the region of King Hermann? Was the boy-king's position impregnable?

Joel was by no means satisfied with Lesser Potamia, and if only he played his cards well he might yet add Great Potamia to his dominions. Surely he would be a match for a boy of sixteen!

So when the wedding ceremonies were over he pro-

posed to the Queen that they should hold a consultation with the heads of the Lutheran party and try to form a strong alliance against King Hermann, whose Catholicity was of such a very uncompromising type. If only Joel could induce the Lutheran clergy to aid him in starting a fund—it was certain that Lesser Potamia would be all the richer, even though the money were used only to pay the Queen's debts, which were scandalously big.

So instead of returning home immediately after the wedding, as they had intended to do, the royal couple travelled through the small Lutheran district of Mahemia, taking great care to conceal their rank from all except the Protestant nobles and ministers they called upon. In all cases they received a flattering welcome.

But far away from Mahemia a much more flattering reception, and certainly a much more sincere one, was being given to a youthful king who was attended by a bodyguard of boy-soldiers.

Scarcely indeed had King Hermann crossed the borders of Lesser Potamia than the inhabitants, beside themselves with joyful anticipation, ran to meet him. Their applause rent the air, while their prayers and appeals for the King's help were incessant.

"Stay with us, most noble King!" was the constant cry. "Remain with us and see us righted!"

The farther Hermann rode into the country the greater became the enthusiasm of the inhabitants.

"Be you our King!" now became the cry, and long before his Majesty reached the castle of Queen Marabout, "Long live our King!" was shouted at every step.

Straight into the courtyard of the castle rode the King and his train, followed by a great crowd of people. Turning in his saddle the boy surveyed the people with a smile. Then raising his hand he commanded silence.

"My friends," he cried in his fresh, high voice, "you do me too much honour. I am not your King, nor will I ever consent to be the ruler of your country. But I am here to look after your interests and to see that your ancient rights are restored to you. I am here to see that no heretical ruler has place in this dominion. I remain here until the return of your lawful sovereign, Queen Marabout. When that return may be I do not know; but I shall not leave your realm until I have had speech with your Queen. Meanwhile, in her name and at your invitation I take possession of this castle, and I wish to confer with any representative men you care to send me. Now, my friends, go quietly

to your homes, and rest assured that all your wrongs shall be righted."

To the King's entry there had not been the slightest show of opposition. The drawbridge was down and the seneschal with his men were playing at bowls in an inner court. All the ladies and most of the pages who were not travelling with the Queen had gone to their homes for a holiday; Joel himself had suggested this as a means of keeping down the expenditure. So with the exception of his own workmen, one or two men-at-arms and servants, there were very few people living within the castle.

It was night, and the King was weary, but as he leapt from his horse he called to him three persons who had been near him on his journey, the Burgomaster of Apburg, Magus and his nephew, and said to them in a low tone: "Before I eat or sleep, I should like to be quite sure that all the dungeons in this castle are empty. I will not question the seneschal or his men; I myself will inspect every cell and vault. Be good enough to accompany me."

Then calling up the seneschal the King said: "For the present I must deprive you of your keys. Order your men to provide more torches."

Bending his knee, the man immediately handed his heavy keys to the King, who placed them in the hands

of Magus, and proceeded to give instructions to his bodyguard.

"To-night you must relieve one another in keeping watch and in guarding the castle. To-morrow my troops will be here to assist you. The measure is but a precautionary one; the people of Lesser Potamia, as well as its army, are our friends."

The place was now ablaze with torches. Calling to him the young jester the King bade him lead the way to the tower where he himself had been imprisoned.

It stood in the inner court or ballium of the castle and was raised on an artificial mound; in its lower portion was the dungeon.

"Sire," said young Marx the jester, "the steps are much worn here, but it may be better to inspect the dungeon first. It was in that I lay for six months."

"I pray God we may find it empty!" exclaimed the King as the door was unlocked and thrown open. It was a huge vault, its walls dripping with water, its floor covered with green slime. So dense was its darkness that at first seven or eight blazing torches seemed insufficient to light it. Its atmosphere was foul in the extreme. Happily it was quite empty. Several sets of fetters lay on the floor and, after looking about, the boy Marx found the iron collar and gyves that he himself had worn. The King looked at them and shuddered.

The young King's face was very stern, but he said little as they left the dungeon and mounted to the ground floor. Here were three or four smaller cells, and in each of them lay a prisoner. In the first was a horse-boy, who was in such a deep sleep that for an instant the King hesitated to awaken him; but when his Majesty saw that the lad wore a collar of iron and that he was chained to the wall, a warder was called and bidden to release the prisoner at once.

In the second cell lay our old friend Master Crimson, very wide-awake indeed, for thick as were the walls of the tower his ears had caught the sound of unusual noises. Blinking his eyes in the torchlight, he raised himself on the straw and showed that his right hand was fettered by a heavy chain to his left ankle. When he saw Marx he burst into tears. The King himself took him by the hands and helped him to rise, saying, "Don't cry, my child; in a few minutes you will be free."

"May it please your Majesty," said one of the several warders in attendance, "we have no keys of any of the fetters: they are all in the keeping of Count Joel."

"Then send for the smith instantly," cried the King. "But there are still two more cells on this floor. Doubtless each has its tenant."

"I grieve to say it, your Majesty," put in the chief warder, "but they are each inhabited by a priest. The two chaplains of the castle have both been shut up here for some time past. I trust your Majesty will not blame us. The Queen has ordered us to obey Count Joel in all things. Willingly would I have removed the prisoners' irons if I had had the keys of them; though to be sure some of the shackles are not locked but rivetted."

"Quick, quick!" exclaimed the King; "this is no time for talking. Unlock the doors."

Entering the third cell his Majesty immediately bent his knee and said, "Give me your blessing, Father. Be so good as to attend me. I come to deliver you."

The dazed priest rose and lifted a manacled hand in benediction.

Already the door of the fourth cell was opened, and the other priest stood on the threshold. Again the King knelt for a blessing. Blows of the hammer now made themselves heard in the tower: broken irons were falling on the floor. The King and his attendants were mounting the stairs to the first story, although the warders assured his Majesty that the remainder of the tower was empty.

To the topmost story went the King, looking in every nook and corner. It was true that the cells were

empty, but his sharp eyes did not fail to note that every one of them showed that they had been tenanted very recently. Irons of every shape and sort, and of inconceivable weight, were lying on the floors, and from their brightness it was easy to see that they had all been worn quite lately. Moreover, scraps of food were scattered here and there, while black drops of what was certainly not ink sometimes stained the walls and pavements. In one room was an iron frame, a sort of stocks and pillory combined; another cell had a wooden whipping-post, with irons for hands and feet. Into one wall was fixed an iron collar, flanked with iron wristlets, and with iron rings at a little height from the floor; the outline of a boy's figure was easily seen on the wall.

Very dark grew the King's face as he examined these things, and it was with a sigh of relief that he left the tower. Though the Chamberlain came to inform his Majesty that supper was served in the great hall, he would not go to meat until he had seen that each of the lately-imprisoned was being well cared for.

But at supper the King grew very cheerful. Having his chaplains on his right hand and the Burgomaster and Magus on his left, he chatted merrily of many things, but chiefly of the new Order of the Silver Shoon he was determined to found forthwith.

Marx, the young jester, had already made friends with the page Boniface—who was the King's cup-bearer, but had been told to sit at table to-night instead of serving. All day had Boniface and Marx ridden together, and now they sat side by side at the board; but the jester was not very merry. He had not quite regained his strength, and the interior of Queen Marabout's castle revived in him many painful memories.

"Where are our minstrels?" asked the King, when supper was all but ended. "Mr. Sub-Dean, where are your singing-boys?"

"Your Majesty," answered the Sub-Dean, "the children were so weary I thought it better to give them food and to send them to rest."

"Quite right," said the King, "I am very glad. Poor lads, they had been on horseback all day. Have we any other minstrels at table? There is Boniface, of course, and Marx—do you sing, Master Jester?"

"Yes, sire," replied Marx modestly, "but I know no song that would be pleasing to your Majesty, and I have no lute with me."

"You shall have a lute, Marx," said the smiling King, "and Boniface shall teach you some of his pretty ballads. Now, Boniface, get your instrument and give us one of your latest ditties."

To a sweet old melody the boy sang the following:

'Twas lilac and laburnum time,
When hawthorn boughs are white,
And leaves are clothing oak and lime
With golden green and light,
When quickly comes the cuckoo-chime
As dies the short'ning night.

A page in blue and silver clad
Went out to meet the morn;
His heart was very gay and glad
Because the Day was born;
Lightly leapt the smiling lad —
Alone, but not forlorn.

As though the day had lately died
The garden ways were mute;
"There cometh neither knight nor bride,
And only throstles flute;
For thee, my Lady-Queen," he cried,
"I'll sing unto my lute."

He gaily tripped, this minstrel child,
Away from rosy bowers,
Leaving the maze of laurels wild
And all the wealth of flowers:
Pealing bells his steps beguiled
Unto the abbey towers.

The light of dawn lay on his face,
  Its fire was in his e'en,
He came unto a woodland space,
  He crossed the meadows green;
He sang, "O Mary, full of grace,
  My Mother and my Queen!"

He halted at the cloister gate:
  "Oh, but the world is fair!
Perchance 'twere well for me to wait?"
  He flashed to Heaven a prayer: . . .
"Better in early life than late
  The Master's lot to share."

At eventide no minstrel stood
  Within the castle-hall:
A smiling lad in cowl and hood
  Knelt in a lowly stall.
He said, his eyes upon the Rood,
  "I have obeyed Thy call."

CHAPTER XVI

A SURPRISE

The King drank no wine, but sat for half an hour or so after supper while Boniface and another page played and sang. When his Majesty rose from the table, Magus begged for a short private audience.

"I would not trouble your Majesty at this hour," he said, "if the matter were not of great importance. It relates to Joel's workmen and to their shops. It will be well to watch the men and to have their tools and materials examined. They are the men Joel brought with him from Bonhomy and they are in his secrets. One of them is the fellow who gave false evidence in the trial of the young apprentices who are now among your Majesty's singing children. If I may say so, I think it would be well to secure that man, and to set seals upon the rooms in which they work."

"Certainly," said the King, "these things are of the utmost importance. I will see the men at once. Will you have the goodness to examine the workshops early to-morrow?"

"To-night, sire, if you will permit me," said Magus.

"If you are not too weary. And now I will send for the workmen."

When the men were brought into the hall the King saw at once that they were much frightened. For a moment he looked them over without speaking. Then, turning to the Burgomaster, his Majesty asked in a low voice which of the five men had given evidence at the trial of the apprentices.

"The fellow with the scar on his cheek, your Majesty. He is probably the foreman and, in Joel's absence, the master of the rest."

The King made a sign to the foreman, at the same time giving orders to the guard that the four workmen should be arrested and kept in safe custody. The men immediately fell upon their knees and begged for mercy.

"I will hear you to-morrow," said the King; "to-night I want speech with your foreman."

The men were led away weeping and protesting, and the King addressed himself to the foreman.

"You are the assistant of Joel the silversmith, are you not?"

The man did not reply.

"You are a native of Bonhomy, are you not?"

The question was not answered.

"Master Burgomaster," said the King, turning to

that official, "you recognise this fellow, do you not?"

"I do, your Majesty."

"It is enough. Guards, take this man to the tower and let him be securely ironed," commanded the King. "We will examine him to-morrow."

On the morrow, and for the first time for many weeks, Holy Mass was offered in the castle chapel. It was Saturday, and when the King had heard Mass at six o'clock—offered in honour of Our Blessed Lady—he went to his desk without breaking his fast. At eight o'clock, Magus was in attendance.

"Seals are upon every door and chest and cabinet of the mint, your Majesty," began Magus, "and I am now about to test the various metals that Joel's men have been using. As far as I have been able to make out there is little enough of gold and silver to be found in the workrooms. But there are several iron chests which are securely locked, and without your Majesty's permission I will not break them open."

"Everything must be examined," said the King. "I myself will go with you. Let some of my horsemen be sent for."

The first iron chest that yielded to the blows of the hammer was entirely filled with what appeared to

be silver sabots. The King laughed heartily at the sight.

"So, so! It seems that Master Joel is going to supply the whole world with relics of my sainted uncle Olaf. What a precious scoundrel that silversmith is!"

"Yes, sire," answered Magus, taking up one of the shoes and scratching its surface; "these are similar to the shoes sent to the King of Bonhomy—iron or tin, thinly covered with silver."

"They may be useful," said the King. "But now, what of the other chests and presses?"

After some time every lock was broken. One iron box was full of gold pieces—the old coinage of Lesser Potamia. Another contained the gold money of Bonhomy. Another was crammed with precious stones. The biggest of all was filled with cups and dishes of pure gold.

"There is a small oak box here," said the King, "clamped with iron and double-locked. Let us see what it holds."

It was some time before it could be opened, but when at length the lid yielded the King took from it—a pair of silver shoes.

"Without doubt these are the genuine articles," exclaimed the King. "These are the shoes Prince Olaf

wore. The marks you spoke of are upon them. These I myself will carry away."

Small heaps of the new and spurious coinage were lying about, and Magus showed the King that some of them could be bent like a piece of tin, while others could be broken in two with thumb and finger.

"It suffices," said the King at length. "Now I must parade my guards and give them orders for the day. I trust my troops will arrive before nightfall, then shall I sing Vespers of Our Lady with a thankful heart."

The chapel bell was tolling for Vespers when the soldiers arrived, and, after greeting them and issuing certain orders, the King and his suite went to their Evensong.

Late that night and after the King had left the hall for his bedchamber, word was brought to him that a courier had just arrived to announce the return on the morrow of the King and Queen of Lesser Potamia.

"Let the man be well treated," said Hermann, "but on no account permit him to leave the castle."

Then the King sent for his confessor.

On the following morning, which was Sunday, the King received Holy Communion at the first Mass, remaining in the chapel to assist at the High Mass, which was performed with much solemnity.

His Majesty had scarcely left the chapel when Boniface came to him to say that from one of the towers Queen Marabout's carriage had been sighted.

In a few seconds Hermann's troops lined the castle from end to end. Within the great gate which was closed stood the King himself, attended by his guards, the Apburg Burgomaster on his right hand, and Magus on his left. Everything had been arranged to give the Queen and Joel a surprise reception.

A profound silence now reigned throughout the castle. Rigid as steel stood the King—waiting.

Presently to those near the gateway the sound of wheels could be heard. The drawbridge was quickly raised. The great doors were flung open. The carriage drove over the drawbridge—which was immediately lowered.

Joel had already stepped out of the coach and was extending his hand to the Queen, when two soldiers stept forward suddenly, each grasping one of his arms. Almost before he could cry out he found himself being dragged at great speed between two lines of soldiers in the direction of the donjon keep.

Meanwhile King Hermann was at the coach door bareheaded, and bowing low before the Queen. Scarcely knowing what was happening, her Majesty alighted and began to look for her husband.

"What is all this?" she cried at length. "What does it all mean? And where is—the King-Consort?"

"Your Majesty's apartments are prepared," began the King. "Your ladies will be in attendance upon you. But for the present I must beg your Majesty not to leave those apartments, except to take air and exercise in the pleasaunce of the inner garden. I deplore this seeming discourtesy and the necessity for it, but I am here by the will of God and of your people, and to defend you from a man who, I fear, is now your husband."

The King stepped aside and made a sign to the two maids-of-honour in attendance; then he bowed again and waited for the Queen to proceed. So bewildered was she that, though her lips seemed to move, no audible word fell from them. As she walked forward she saw the two long lines of soldiers standing at attention like so many statues. Her face became very pale; tears fell from her eyes, but she could find no words.

The King immediately summoned a council.

"I trust the traitor Joel is in safe custody?" his Majesty enquired when all had assembled.

"Your Majesty's orders have been carried out to the letter," said Magus. "The Burgomaster and I did

not leave him until he was heavily ironed and carried to the lower dungeon."

"It is well," said the King. "We will not keep him waiting long for his trial. Let us now deliberate. This afternoon I received the representatives of the people of Lesser Potamia."

The council sat until noonday and then adjourned until after dinner. Eventually it was decided that the trial should begin on the following morning.

But before the day was over the King examined Joel's five workmen. It was an easy task. Seeing that their case was a desperate one, each now vied with the other in vilifying their master. The foreman confessed that he had been bribed by his master to bear false witness against the young apprentices. Confronted with the silver shoes found in the small oak chest, he admitted that they were the pair originally made for Prince Olaf and bought back from the Prior by Joel.

A little later the King sent for the Queen's courier. From this man his Majesty heard particulars of the marriage, which had been performed by a heretical minister. The courier also said that Joel's son would arrive in a few days, bringing with him two Zwinglian chaplains.

As a matter of fact, Joel's son was never heard of again.

CHAPTER XVII

BROUGHT TO BOOK

For years past Lesser Potamia had known nothing of justice. Absolute monarch as the Queen was, she had changed her chief justices and judges at her pleasure, often, as it was afterward proved, selling at a price the highest offices in the land.

At the council King Hermann had held with the people on the afternoon of Sunday, he begged them to name any judges in whose probity they had sufficient trust. They were unanimous in declaring that the one man in that neighbourhood in whom they had entire confidence was Magus. It was in vain that the good man pleaded his ignorance of the law; there were no subtleties in the case, he was reminded; besides, he would be assisted by the Burgomaster from Bonhomy, and a jury of Lesser Potamians would give the verdict.

On the morning of Monday the Mass of the Holy Ghost was solemnly sung, and at nine o'clock the trial began. Cursing and blaspheming, Joel was brought into the judgment hall—which to his horror was hung in black and lighted with tapers and torches. In the centre of the hall lay the heaps of light money he had

coined, the chests of old gold pieces he had forced the people to exchange for the new ones, the chests of plate and jewels, the pile of spurious silver shoes with which he had hoped to impose upon the devout.

King Hermann sat by the judge, who was supported by the Burgomaster.

So great was the noise made by Joel, and so horrible were his imprecations that, almost before the trial had begun, Magus told him that if he was not silent he would be gagged.

The principal witnesses against him were his own workmen. But when four of them had been examined at great length, and the foreman was taken from the bar (where he had been standing as a prisoner with his master), in order to give his evidence, Joel's rage grew so frantic that a gag was promptly thrust into his mouth. Then he began to shake and to rattle his irons, but from this he was easily restrained.

It was evening before the examination of the witnesses was concluded, and then the judge, addressing the prisoner, from whose mouth the gag had now been taken, asked him if he wished to call any witnesses for the defence?—If there was anybody in Bonhomy, or in Lesser Potamia, or elsewhere he could employ to speak in his favour?—If he would care to be taken to

Bonhomy and tried by a jury of his own countrymen? —If he wished to appeal to the King of Bonhomy?

All these questions Joel answered with a vociferous "No."

There was a pause in the proceedings while the judge held a whispered consultation with the King and the Burgomaster. The court was now very still and Joel himself was silent.

Suddenly the hangings at the upper end of the hall were pushed aside and two boys entered, hand in hand, looking pale and frightened, but resolute. They wore the dress of the King's children of the chapel. Their eyes were fixed upon the prisoners.

Joel had been hiding his face in his hands, but hearing the silence broken by footsteps he looked up. His eyes met those of the two boy apprentices he had tried so hard to deprive of their innocent lives. It was too much for the wretched man. A hoarse shriek rang through the hall, and he cried out again and again: "Take them away! Take them away! They torture me! I am guilty—guilty—guilty! I confess all. There is no need to prolong the trial."

Tremblingly the boys withdrew. The judge summed up at great length. When he had finished it wanted but an hour to midnight. Magus turned to the jury.

"There is little need for me to speak to you at great

length," he said. "To the many counts of the indictment the prisoners plead guilty. If any of you think this trial has been too hurried I am willing to adjourn it. By the ancient laws of this country I, as judge, have peculiar privileges, and I can hear any appeal the prisoners care to make—for a new trial, e.g.—even before you consider your verdict. Prisoners at the bar, I ask you again if you wish the trial to be adjourned, or to be opened afresh, or to be transferred to another place?"

"End it! End it!" shouted Joel, "I am guilty."

"I, too, am guilty," said the foreman.

Once again the judge spoke to the jury, but they had no need to retire or to consider their verdict, and without an instant's delay they returned it, saying: "We find both prisoners guilty upon every charge."

Without comment and without parley the judge passed upon both men the sentence of death. As to the mode of execution, he added, though for some of the crimes the prisoners had committed death by fire was ordered by the law of the country, he would take counsel before making a decision.

Three days later, in the presence of an enormous crowd, Joel and his foreman were hanged upon a high gallows erected upon an open plain not far from the

castle. To the last moment Joel was impenitent, declaring that no matter how many priests, or even ministers of the new religion, came to him he would not hear them. The foreman willingly made his confession and prepared himself for death.

On the day before the execution Queen Marabout was conveyed in a coach, attended by two of her ladies, and guarded by a band of soldiers, to the Benedictine convent of the Abbess Magdalene, that lay some thirty or forty miles from the castle. There she lived as a prisoner and as a guest, for many long years, and there she died, giving much trouble to the abbess and her nuns, but showing great fear and some penitence at the approach of death.

Willingly would the people of Lesser Potamia have had King Hermann to reign over them, but he would not even accept the protectorate of their country. Magus, he told them, was the one man who was in every way fitted to be their ruler. They might call him King, or judge, or protector, or president, but he was the saviour of their country and was entirely worthy of their confidence.

So, greatly to his sorrow, and not without making several vain attempts to leave the country, Magus was crowned King. Long and happy was his reign. His first step was to form a big standing army for his

country's safety; then he invited to his court, or induced to settle within his realm, many men of letters and of science, learned theologians and scholars. So the shadow of heresy never fell upon his land.

"Ignorance," he was wont to say, "is the mother of error and of superstition. Through being learned no man ever lost his Faith. Through pride, and from the partial knowledge that puffeth up, many have perished."

Magus lived on pleasant terms with the Kings of Bonhomy and Great Potamia, and greatly encouraged the pilgrimages that his people were in the habit of making to the tomb of Prince Olaf, the cause of whose beatification he did much to further.

When King Hermann had visited every part of his territory and had shown himself to all his people, the first thing he did was to found the now famous Order of the Silver Shoon. In it were three grades, that of the knights, the squires, and the pages. One of the first to receive the order of the Knighthood of the Silver Shoon was King Magus. At a great function held in the cathedral, the new order was placed under the protection of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and of the Blessed Olaf. Every one of its members pledged himself to perform every day of his life, one or more of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Boys of

twelve were received into the grade of pages; at eighteen they became squires; at the age of twenty-one they might be knighted. As the King bestowed it with circumspection, and for personal virtue and merit, and not at all on account of rank and position, much less of riches, it became more esteemed than the Order of the Golden Fleece. Its livery was of blue velvet and silk, its badge the silver shoe. Its banner and shield were of blue, charged with the silver sabot.

The first boy received among its pages was Boniface. His friend Marx, at one time Queen Marabout's jester, was already wearing the habit of St. Benedict.

CHAPTER XVIII

EPILOGUE

A DECADE of years or so before the close of the sixteenth century there was a day in the history of Great Potamia that no inhabitant of that famous land ever forgot. It was the day of King Hermann's marriage. He had reached his twenty-first year. Boniface had now become the King's secretary.

Since the day of his coronation, when he was fifteen and a half, his Majesty had travelled much; had seen many lands, including his own; had met many fair and gracious ladies. But never had he met a maiden so sweet, so gentle, so wise, or so devout as the Lady Elizabeth. For several years past she had been one of his mother's maids-of-honour, and though until lately his intercourse with her had been very slight, he had never forgotten the impression she had made upon his young heart. The memory of her had always been to him a sweet and holy one, and though at first the Queen-Mother was disposed to regret his choice, the more she saw of the prudent and pious damsel the more her Majesty loved and honoured her.

So again the great cathedral doors were thrown open to the people for a ceremony not less magnificent, and certainly not less touching, than that of the coronation itself. The streets of the city were almost hidden under clouds of blue and silver hangings, for it had become known that these were the young Queen's favourite colours, as well as the King's.

On that day the guard of honour was entirely composed of the knights, squires, and pages of the Order of the Silver Shoon. Everywhere the banner of the Order floated, mingling with the white and gold of the papal flag. The Holy Father had sent his Cardinal-Secretary of State to perform the ceremony.

Throughout the length and breadth of the land there was not a man, woman, or child who did not rejoice that their beloved young King had chosen for his bride a maiden so holy and so wise. Historians tell us that the joy of the people of Great Potamia was indescribable; and, what is of greater moment, they add that until the last day of her life, as well as that of King Hermann, the nation did not cease to bless God for sending them so gracious and so devoted a King and Queen.

It was on the day of the wedding itself, before the

end of the great court banquet, that the King announced to his guests that his dear bride intended to institute a new Order for ladies. The Dames of the Silver Shoon were, like their fathers, husbands, and brothers, to pledge themselves to the practice of all the works of mercy, both corporal and spiritual.

In a memorable oration his Majesty pointed out that the true greatness of a nation depended in no wise upon its commercial prosperity, upon its successes in war, or upon the vastness of its foreign possessions. Virtue, and virtue alone, made a nation truly great. But without a right Faith, virtue could never be strong or lasting. They had the Faith, the Faith of the One Church founded by Jesus Christ. In order to preserve that Faith they must practise its precepts. They could not practise its precepts unless they performed the works of mercy, each according to his opportunity and his ability. The order he had founded for men and boys was for the purpose of distinguishing those who were notably faithful in feeding the hungry, in clothing the naked, and in succouring all who were in any distress of mind or body. Her gracious Majesty, his beloved Queen, desired to do for maids and matrons what he had already done for boys and men. Under the patronage of the Holy Mother of God, the Queen

of Mount Carmel, and his sainted relative the Blessed Olaf, he prayed that Great Potamia might be known through all ages as the land in which the worth of works of mercy was esteemed above all honours and riches and dignities, the land in which the highest possible distinction would ever be—admission to the Order of the Silver Shoon.

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